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**Disputing authorities: the longer fiction of
Rebecca West**

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Declaration

This thesis is a development of research initially undertaken for my MA dissertation: 'Patterns of fantasy: the fiction of Rebecca West' (Warwick, 1986), in which I wrote on five of West's texts: *The Return of the Soldier*, *The Judge*, *Harriet Hume*, *The Thinking Reed*, and *The Birds Fall Down*. Some ideas from that piece have been incorporated into the present thesis, though my approach and focus have shifted considerably.

Summary

The thesis offers a reading of Rebecca West's longer fiction as texts constituted by disputing authorities. It begins by placing West in a socio-historical context, showing how her own life, personal and political interests were insistently grappling with questions of authority. It moves on in the second chapter to examine the contradictions inherent in the patterning of narrative structures in West's fiction. The third chapter considers the construction of authority within narrative contexts as a complex of textual power relations. A reading of female subject positions as sites of gendered struggle comprises the last chapter. Together these demonstrate the necessity for the redefinition of the notion of authority, a move which has significant implications for the meaning and relevance of power in respect of art and female subjectivity.

In the course of the thesis, I draw on a selection of West's non-fiction writing and journalism, as well as autobiographical and biographical material, in order to furnish a context for her work, and to highlight the significance of opposing voices heard through the fictional texts. My readings are made from a feminist perspective (no extended study of West's fiction has hitherto been made from this position), and are influenced by the writings of a range of feminist critics and theoreticians.

Abbreviations

Page references for quotations from West's fictional texts are incorporated into the main body of the thesis. The following abbreviations are used.

ROTS *The Return of the Soldier*

J *The Judge*

S *Sunflower*

HH *Harriet Hume*

AV 'The Abiding Vision'

TR *The Thinking Reed*

BFD *The Birds Fall Down*

FO *The Fountain Overflows*

TRN *This Real Night*

CR *Cousin Rosamund*

Where a series of quotations from a single source page is cited in succession, the page reference is given after the last citation.

Foreword

The thesis proposes to read West's longer fiction as texts constituted by disputing authorities. This focus will range from an examination of the contradictions inherent in the patterning of narrative structures in West's fiction, to the construction of authority as a complex of textual power relations within narrative contexts, and on to a reading of female subject positions as sites of gendered struggle. Together, these demonstrate the necessity for the redefinition of the notion of authority (its identity), a move which has significant implications for the meaning and relevance of power in respect of art and female subjectivity.

Drawing on a selection of West's non-fiction writing and journalism, as well as autobiographical and biographical material, my thesis, written from a feminist perspective, examines the diversity and relative volumes of opposing voices in the texts: dogmatism, conservatism and tradition, are challenged by irreverence, subversion, radicalism and heresy. As a reader/writer, I am necessarily involved in these conflicts, as both consumer and producer of meanings.

Without reducing the author's personality to her texts, I feel it is vital to relate the reading of West's texts to her social, historical place: to examine the relationship between textuality and the situation of one woman (among many) who was 'fighting against herself a lot of the time'. There is a special case to argue against 'the death of the author', with regard

to women writers, since they have first to be brought to life before they can be put to death. Rebecca West commented of her own writing that 'I have never been able to write with anything more than the left hand of my mind; the right hand has always been engaged in something to do with personal relationships. I don't complain because I think my left hand's power, as much as it has, is due to its knowledge of what my right hand is doing'.² In addition, as Mary Jacobus declares, 'we need the term "women's writing" if only to remind us of the social conditions under which women wrote and still write - to remind us that the conditions of their (re)production are the economic and educational disadvantages, the sexual and material organizations of society, which, rather than biology, form the crucial determinants of women's writing'.³

The short introductory chapter, which includes pertinent biographical detail, aims to place West in a socio-historical context, illustrating how her own life and personal and political interests were insistently grappling with questions of authority and also, importantly, with its relational enemy: treachery. The concept of authority is also examined in conjunction with issues which make it both meaningful and problematic in relation to West's writing: performance, gender, and sacrifice. I hope to show the interconnectedness of these issues and their respective influences on one another. Their specific relation to West's individual works of fiction will be examined and extended within subsequent chapters.

The second chapter approaches the fictional narratives as realist forms disrupted from achieving (the illusion of) a unified meaning or identity. A

dominant (paternal) discourse is disturbed by voices or alternative narrative impulses which challenge its presentation of integral authority.

The structural contradictions which the 'whole' texts represent to obscure, are comparable with those which are examined as (dis)contents in the third chapter. The chapter will consider the fiction's significant investment in figures of power, in their mutual and reciprocal relation with what is other to them. Patriarchal figures and systems - individual, institutional and economic - are both idolised by the (inevitably) conventionalised female perspective, and ironised by the marginalised and disruptive feminine. The project of deposing the patriarchal Father is a task always felt as treacherous but never relinquished. It necessarily unsettles the subject: her faith in herself and in the other.

Through the destabilising of traditional, 'safe' structures, the notion of a fixed and static subject identity is called into question. The fourth chapter aims to show how awareness of the elusive nature of the meaning of identity, as well as of sexuality and gender (despite attempts by a patriarchal culture to fix them), complicates and complements the necessary move towards appropriation of a position from which the female subject is empowered to rewrite her own authority as a process of subjectivity. By extension, the flexibility of performative gender positions which that process dramatises, has implications for the appropriation of the art text as both subject and object.

1.

**Rebecca West and the cultural/textual contexts of
authority**

Cicely Isabel Fairfield
was born in London, December 1892

Rebecca West (Mrs Henry Andrews née Cicely Isabel Fairfield)
died in London, March 1983

Rebecca West represents a familiar contradiction for twentieth century women: a self-threatening dissident at war with a snug conformist. Throughout her life she staked her claim to authority as an individual woman and as a feminist. She was persistently critical of the traditional and tenacious male stronghold on power in both private and public arenas. Yet jostling against the confident assertions of her apparently liberated (personally, sexually, politically) feminist perspective as Rebecca West the journalist, critic, and 'personality' - are the disputing voices heard through her fiction: at times iconoclastic, but also reverential of, and nostalgic for (imprisonment by) a fictional Father: a symbol of traditional authority whose idealised power is alternately dreamed of (as a refuge from chaos) and ironised (as the fictive fallacy) by a female subject of/to patriarchy.

Political espionage, romance, family saga, fantasy: West wrote in a whole range of genres, adopting a plurality of style, tone and position. On the fictional page, her authorial voice is diffused into the discourses of the various narrative positions, so that experimenting with a myriad perspectives and subject preoccupations becomes possible. Here the author (the authority) *cannot* be finally identified or fixed: she eludes definition. West once remarked that 'a writer composes a book in order to put down what the warring elements in him think on some subject which interests them all, and to arbitrate between them'.¹ The voices are not obliged to sit still or to reveal themselves as authorial identity (whether the reader *wants* them to or not). Through the fictional medium West was able to enjoy authority: setting up and organizing positions, and freedom from authority: her anonymity in and difference/dissidence from those positions. In this way, she represents and projects 'a flux of alternative selves, and sometimes a more frightened woman than the world that knew the equally authentic, confident and stellar Rebecca West could well imagine'.²

According to West, fiction, (which she preferred writing to journalism or criticism), 'compares the way music compares to speech - it gives the emotional overtones better'.³ Literature writes a layering, a connotative language which allows for the dissemination of a complex of meanings. In West's fiction the voices' authenticity is everywhere and nowhere, looking for a home and resisting (ar)rest. Authority is (dis)located not in a single voice, but in the energy of textuality through which multiple voices weave. The diversity of West's range disconcerted many critics. Robert Towers, for example, has commented that 'her style veers from book to book making it difficult to identify a distinctive voice of her own'.⁴ And A.S.

Byatt remarks that she 'had no strong single voice as a novelist, though she had a very strong one, precise and flamboyant, opposite and unexpected as a critic'.⁵ It was West's distinctive persona in the arena of non-fiction writing which the public recognised as normative.

West's novice journalistic pen had early on laid the ground for what was soon to win her a formidable and legendary reputation. As a campaigning feminist, during the second decade of the twentieth century, her combative spirit was sharpened to produce a singular voice and fearless tone suited to a direct challenging of patriarchy. The name Rebecca West became identified and synonymous with a caustic, if playful, iconoclasm.

The discrepant voices through which West slipped and wove as a writer of, on the one hand, fiction and on the other, non-fiction, tell the metaphoric story of so many women's experience in Britain during this century. The contradictions, discernible in the life and texts of a woman such as Rebecca West offer an account of women's oscillation between confidence and temerity in challenging traditional pillars of authority.

From the end of the nineteenth century to 1918, feminism in Britain was a reaction against patterns of tradition which characterised Victorian notions of femininity, and which placed women in negative relation to any concept of authority. While feminists were sure about their right to vote, they were not united by any clear vision of a new ideology or long-term

political strategy to implement once it had been won. Mary Jacobus has commented that 'the drive to female emancipation, while fueled by revolutionary energy, had an ultimately conservative aim - successful integration into existing social structures'.⁶ Nevertheless, these structures were themselves much less than secure: Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain how science, religion, industry, psychology and politics were being shaken at their very bases.

By the turn of the century 'the sea of Faith' had withdrawn when God the *Father* disappeared, and Darwin had shown that man is not a lord of the universe but a 'monkey shav'd'. In addition, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Captains of Industry were being threatened by rebellious troops of labourers, Freud was claiming that sons secretly resented and feared fathers, and eventually a generation of sons were destroyed in battle.⁷

Although women over thirty got the vote in 1918, and on the same terms as men in 1928, women's suffrage offered only superficial emancipation (and this was generally confined to the middle classes). Economic dependence, professional inequalities, social prejudice and sexual subordination, and the availability of birth control being largely determined by population policies and welfare reform, ensured continued dissatisfaction in the lives of many women. Moreover, while ideas about women's sexuality and their right to sexual pleasure were being expressed, the notion that maternity represented true female destiny was still prevalent.⁸ Moreover, psychological and emotional inheritances and investments are not overthrown

as soon as laws are changed. The intellectual convictions of the feminist cause were pulling in a direction still overwhelmingly foreign to material, cultural and attitudinal structures - trying to reconcile a 'new' history with a recalcitrant tradition and patriarchal prejudice. The different interests of feminists in terms of class, economics and ideology also meant that the movement lost the power of cohesion which had impelled the battle for suffrage.⁹

Women had formed a significant and important sector of the workforce during the two world wars. As West pointed out in 1916, 'if the suffragettes and suffragists had not conducted their campaigns there would not have been the vast and willing army of women which is taking men's places all over the country'.¹⁰ However, during the interwar years, as well as in the 1940s and 1950s there were concerted moves by the state to return women to the domestic sphere, to the place they belonged, discouraging their new-found economic independence as wage earners, and refusing to meet their demands for equal pay. Their value as mothers and upholders of domestic havens was reinforced through legal, social and media pressures, and a traditional image of femininity extolled.¹¹

In her early journalism West's voice was certainly unwavering in smashing out protests against traditional mores; her fictional voices, however, admit the complexities which make such simple and unequivocal rejection impossible. A clear indication of the enormous effort and time required to work towards resolving the tensions was remarked on by West during an interview in 1975: 'There is certainly a place for the women's movement, because the very existence of the problem and its severity means

that the cause is never won. *Women are always being put back in their place*' (my italics).¹² Feminism is an ongoing challenge to any notion of women's definitive - ultimate or original - place.

Observing the current (1990s) status of feminism in Britain, we see that despite glib references to our era of 'post-feminism', women are still having to fight against discriminatory treatment professionally; how many women are still so noticeably absent from positions of authority in public and political life?¹³ In addition, a cultural attitude (powerfully reinforced and reproduced by the male-controlled media) continues to perceive women as essentially sexual objects of masculine desire, in possession of an authority which is severely compromised by rigid gender distinctions. And where formerly a woman's (compromised) authority was recognised through her fulfilment of a singular role as mother, virgin or some one thing, she now feels pressured to reflect the image of embracing Absolutely Everything: the Superwoman who is a 'master' professional, a devoted mother, a stunning beauty, and a sexual adventuress.

'The woman who is acting the principal part in her own ambitious play is unlikely to weep because she is not playing the principal part in some man's no more ambitious play',¹⁴

West's bold (journalistic) assertion obscured her private but powerful desire for recognition by that 'some man' personally, emotionally and sexually. Her use of theatrical metaphor here is significant, I think, and saturates her fiction. She conceived life as a play and male / female relations as vital and turbulent drama. From a very young age, Cissie had shown an absorbing interest in the theatre, and had seen Sarah Bernhardt, Mrs Patrick Campbell, Ellen Terry and Yvette Guilbert on the stage. She had also performed in plays herself, and belonged to an amateur dramatics society. In 1910 she passed an audition for RADA; however her time there was not happy and she left after three terms. Cicely's pseudonym, which she assumed in 1912, was drawn from the theatrical heroine, Rebecca West, the independent spirit of Ibsen's drama, *Rosmersholm*.¹⁵ The reason for taking a different name was primarily to alleviate the anxieties of her mother, disturbed by the scandalous publicity which the suffragettes' activities aroused. As Victoria Glendinning remarks, 'it is impossible to overstress the distaste and horror with which the militants were regarded by the majority of both men and women'.¹⁶ Later in her life West's attempts to write for the theatre were unsuccessful, although people associated with the theatre numbered among her close friends. In 1981 she enjoyed the dramatic coup that had earlier eluded her; she appeared in the film *Reds*.¹⁷ Later she commented that 'to end up in *Who's who* as having acted heals a wound that has hurt for seventy-four years'.¹⁸

Anthony West wrote his mother as a selfish and temperamental actress, Naomi Savage, in *Heritage*, his fictionalised rendering of his boyhood.¹⁹ In her posthumously published and uncompleted novel of the mid-1920s, *Sunflower*, West's narrative voice writes very close to her principal character who is a well-known actress.

Cicely Fairfield's choice of the pseudonym Rebecca West, the heroine of Ibsen's 1882 play *Rosmersholm*, was, she claimed later, made in haste, and held no particular significance for her.²⁰ But the similarities between Ibsen's fictional Rebecca and Rebecca cannot be ignored: their determined challenging of tradition, their defiance of a stultifying convention and public morality. Perhaps most poignantly, though, both shared (against the powerful conviction of their beliefs) what Ibsen's Rebecca admitted as 'some little prejudice clinging to one that one can't shake off': a cultural inheritance which still recognised as heretical the desire to, as Kroll in *Rebecca West* remarks, 'upset much of what has hitherto been regarded as gospel and unchallengeable';²¹ the gospel of patriarchy.

Perhaps the world of the actress was alluring to West particularly because it legitimised the performance of roles; it was also an effective cover for the insecurities she felt as a consequence of her disrupted family life, her sense of not belonging to any particular class, and the very fact of being a woman in the proverbial man's world.

West's attachment to the theatre was matched by her love for music, a passion she inherited from her mother. Allusions to music, to composers and their compositions crowd both her fiction and non-fiction writing, as expressions of vital pleasure, in defiance of any kind of suffering or defeatism of the temporal order. In her memoirs, *Family Memories*, she describes her relations with music as 'abnormal because my relations with sound are abnormal'. Certain sounds - such as that of an organ or of a train locomotive - caused her actual physical pain. By contrast, the sound of the piano notes as her mother played, for example, 'caused me no pain whatsoever, but instead were pure pleasure'. The pleasure which art could offer was always to be West's 'meat and drink'.²²

Isabella Fairfield (née Mackenzie), Cissie's mother, was a Scot, and a talented pianist, 'but she was denied by her sex that understanding of the whole field of music that her brothers had, for the reason that she could not play in an orchestra, or undergo any of the rough-and-tumble training that Alick [one of her brothers] had got for the asking between the ages of ten and eighteen'.²³ Lacking the opportunity to play professionally, Isabella earned her living as a musical governess. After her husband left home she was responsible for raising three daughters independently.

Authority and order define themselves against what they construct as outside themselves: they *depend* on what they omit to achieve their identity: their meaning. In a patriarchal order the issues of authority's (in)dependence is obscured.

H.G. Wells, the novelist and prominent public figure who spoke and wrote on social and political issues, was curious to meet Rebecca West after reading her sharp review of his novel, *Marriage*, in *The Freewoman*, in 1912.²⁴ They were soon lovers and before long West became inadvertently pregnant. Wells, despite his public advocacy of free love, persuaded her to secrecy; he was not prepared to give up his own marriage to Jane Wells, or the comfortable family home life he enjoyed. West spent six months of her pregnancy in lodgings in Norfolk. On 4 August, 1914, the day on which Britain declared war on Germany, their son, Anthony West was born.

One of West's earliest works of fiction, a short story, 'Indissoluble Matrimony', was published in the same year. The tale is a quasi-surrealistic narrative which expresses the feelings of fear, hostility and revulsion which a sensually and sexually powerful woman, active in socialist politics, arouses in her husband.²⁵

In 1900, an overview of British culture and society at the turn of the century, and the last of her books to be published before she died, West wrote how around this time, people 'disliked the idea of a woman who had sexual intercourse outside marriage being treated with ordinary respect, unless she was very rich, when the situation was pretended not to exist',²⁶ In *War Nurse*, West's ghost-written novel set mainly in France during the First World War, the effects of this conventional morality on individual women's lives is explored.²⁷

From a woman's perspective, the very word authority has for so long conjured up a myriad of images that have been literally beyond her: an institution, a grey building, an imposing presence, an impersonal and vague, but nonetheless overbearing and delimited masculine figuration, separate and distinct. All these images reflect the domineering power of cultural and psychological forces which regulate women, which validate them, and which they have come to *desire* and *depend* on for a sense of their own value - or lack of it. Material, economic and political conditions conspire in the extension and maintenance of such a situation. A traditional concept of authority can be compared to that which defines Jacques Lacan's use of the term phallus in his psychoanalytic rereadings of Freud. The phallus is the signifier of sexual difference, the Law of the Father, an apparently transcendental authority, which controls (but can never satisfy) subjective desire. In a patriarchal culture males and females have a different relation to the Other (to the place of their constitution as subjects), to the phallus. While the phallus is, in Terry Eagleton's words, 'an empty marker of difference',²⁸ (covering the empty space of chaos), it is also nevertheless a symbol of power which privileges men and subordinates women in the patriarchal symbolic order. In this order women are either relegated to the place of the second or negative term, or

hypostatized as the reflection of a masculine ideal. Men's identification with the symbol of the phallus affords them greater control over what is other to them, over (their) images of women, and therefore over women's (mis)perceptions of themselves. As Jane Flax remarks, 'within a male-dominated society possession of a penis or access to the phallus is particularly valuable, and anyone interested in certain sorts of power or privilege would worry about its loss or lack'.²⁹ A feminist struggle for authority is also a struggle against the desire of the phallus, and the emotional and psychological investment involved in that.

I would agree with Jacqueline Rose's assertion that the most important basis for the affinity which exists between psychoanalysis and feminism is their shared recognition that a resistance to identity lies at the heart of psychic life. The unconscious consistently exerts a pressure which disrupts the subject's claim to a cohesive psychic and sexual identity.³⁰ This awareness has enabled feminists to challenge their subjection to a definitive sex-determined role by an authority which, fortified by social power structures, presumes upon its own integrity.

West's own feelings about psychoanalysis were ambivalent. Reading Freud's theories as *prescriptive*, on the one hand, she finds him lacking in his (mis)perceptions about female sexuality. Thus, for example, she describes him as 'a great enemy of women. All that nonsense about women suffering from penis envy, which presupposes that the unconscious does not tell little girls that they have perfectly good sex organs within themselves Given that fundamental folly, I regard psychoanalysis with great suspicion when it tries to establish the concept of a "female role". There

must be one but the Freudians would be the last people to know what it is'³¹. On the other hand she finds his psychoanalysis, as *descriptive* of power relations of authority, specifically familial and political, an appropriate explanation of her own understanding of those connections. This psychoanalytic account suggests that those who attack heads of state are not acting as a result of impersonal political theory, 'so much as out of the desire to resolve emotional disturbances set up by childish resentment against their parents'.³²

Anglo-Irish Charles Fairfield, Cissie's father, met and married Isabella Mackenzie in 1883, while both were living temporarily in Australia. The first two of their three daughters, Lettie and Winnie were born there before the couple returned to Britain around 1887. Charles was a journalist, and a financial speculator who was also a compulsive gambler. He was anti-socialist and a fierce anti-suffragist - in his journalism he described them as 'strange shipwrecked lost souls'.³³

In 1901 Charles Fairfield left his family to cope with the debts of his financial recklessness, and travelled to Sierra Leone, West Africa, where he planned to set up a pharmaceutical factory. After just four months, however, he returned to England - to lodgings in Liverpool, where both his health and wealth progressively worsened. He died alone in 1906, when Cicely was nearly fourteen, and living with her mother and sisters in Edinburgh. West wrote various separate and lengthy stories of her father for her family memoirs; the published account is a constructed and adapted version of an early draft. Charles Fairfield also appears, as does Isabella Mackenzie in West's part-autobiographical fiction, *Cousin Rosamund; A Saga of the Century*.

In 1927 West underwent an intermittent course of psychoanalysis; with Freudian analysts. She described her analysis to Lettie, her sister, as 'a terribly intricate and complex business, based on an inconceivably disguised father fixation'. Part of West's psychoanalysis focused on the brief and disappointing affair she had with Lord Beaverbrook, in 1923, and identified her masochism and penis envy in the relationship; her masochism was an expression of 'expiation for guilt due to transfer of libido to father'.³⁴

Women have been cast as the objects of authority rather than as themselves potent(ial) author(itie)s. The turn of the century set in train perhaps most important tasks for feminism: breaking down those boundaries that artificially separate authority and the female subject, psychologically and

practically. Only by analysing women's relationship to forms of authority: familial, sexual, economic, political and cultural, and examining the ways in which these mediate their subjectivity, can a new bound-less relationship be imagined. Striving to transform the meaning(s) and places of authority, demonstrates a movement towards its consistent redefinition. A movement from subjection (of Woman) to the subjectivities (of women), opens up the possibilities for productive readings of West's fiction.

Those few critics who have published books on the writing of Rebecca West have almost uniformly tended to treat her fiction dismissively, as a failing or missing of some invisible but unquestionably fixed 'standard'. In *Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker* (1971), Peter Wolfe uses West's interest in the Augustinian doctrine of original sin as the linchpin of all her work. His discussion of her fiction concentrates on the philosophical implications of morality, of the notions of good and evil. While he admires *The Fountain Overflows* and *The Birds Fall Down* for 'their carefully ordered style', his analysis of *The Return of the Soldier*, *The Judge*, *Harriet Hume*, and *The Thinking Reed* finds that 'their violation of probability and neglect of incident makes them literary exercises rather than novels. Although novelistically designed, they are *only imitations* of novels' (my italics).³⁵ A woman is caught unconvincingly mimicking the model again.

Motley Deakin's *Rebecca West* (1980) devotes two sections to her fiction writing, crudely divided into 'early experiments' and 'later achievements'. The study offers mainly a resumé of plot narrative, vague generalisations about significant themes, and attempts to extract autobiographical 'truths' from the texts, to sum up the total Rebecca West.

The most recently published study is by Harold Orel. In *The Literary Achievement of Rebecca West* (1986), his approach in the chapter given over to her fiction is similar to but less probing than Wolfe's. Elsewhere, he comments that 'the novels have the appearance of having been written for commercial markets, with more sentimentality than one might credit from a tough grained temperament; and they frequently lurch along without a controlling sense of structure' (my italics).³⁶ Now the woman can't stick to the path.

Samuel Hynes, whose 1973 essay in the *Times Literary Supplement* was later slightly shortened to introduce a selected anthology of West's fiction and non-fiction writing, *Rebecca West: A Celebration* (1977), finds difficulty in the fact that she is a woman at all: 'One must feel some discomfort in the fact that an appreciation of so considerable a talent as Dame Rebecca's should start, inevitably, with the problems arising from her sex. ... There is scarcely a book of hers that does not have in it a feminist character (often thrust in anyhow, to make a speech about corsets), or a feminist idea. And her own career as a successful professional writer has demonstrated both the problem of being a woman artist and the solution to it'. Fortunately, West 'answers' the problem of her sex, according to Hynes, by realising that 'a woman must stretch beyond woman's matters'; the 'fine strong and androgynous mind that we meet in her books is her achievement'.³⁷ The constricting concerns of what matters to women clearly have no place in the man's 'real' world beyond.

Victoria Glendinning's short but fascinating and evocative biography, *Rebecca West: A Life*, traces the very intricate web that connects West's

private to her public concerns as a woman: their interdependence is their significance, is their intrigue and complexity. The biographical detail I have included in the thesis is gleaned largely from *Rebecca West: A Life*; Glendinning's contextualising of West's writing - both fiction and non-fiction - has also has also been of enormous value to me.³⁸

Also helpful has been *Family Memories*, West's uncompleted memoirs, edited and introduced by Faith Evans. Most of the published text concerns West's parents and their ancestral families, with shorter sections on Cissie's own childhood, and the family background of her husband, Henry Andrews.

My own readings of West's longer fiction are indebted to selected aspects of the work of a number of feminist theoreticians, writers and critics: most significant, perhaps, are Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Mary Jacobus. Their vigorous and sustained rewriting and reviewing of masculinist readings of our world(s), inspires and strengthens my own commitment to a challenge and transformation of our texts: their relation to and informing of our culture.

In November 1911, Cicely had her first article published in the second issue of *The Freewoman*.³⁹ Her exuberant and distinctive style were immediately impressive as she argued against the economic inequalities endured by a female workforce; against the sacrifice of women to men and children; against any idealistic images of women; and in favour of their sexual freedom and creative energy. West went on to write both polemic and literary review articles for, amongst other papers, *The New Freewoman*, *The Clarion*, the *Daily News*, the *Daily Herald*, and the *Daily Chronicle*. In 1916 she published her first book of non-fiction, *Henry James*, a sharp and irreverently witty appraisal of the novelist. Later she contributed to the *New Republic*, the *New Statesman*, and reviewed plays for *Outlook*. She gradually moved away from exclusively socialist affiliations, becoming distrustful of and frustrated by what she perceived as their narrow focus. During the 1920s she made lecture tours in the United States, and was writing for *TP's Weekly*, *Time and Tide*, and *John O'London's Weekly*. In 1928 a collection of essays written for the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *New Statesman* was published together with a long essay, 'The Strange Necessity' - West's account of the importance of art as an analysis and synthesis of experience, in a book of that name, *Ending*

in Earnest: A Literary Log, a collection of essays, including pieces on Woolf, Lawrence and Evelyn Waugh, followed in 1931. During the 1930s she was drawing an income from her journalism in both Britain and the United States.

Shoshana Felman has commented that 'authority is the power of fiction'.⁴⁰ The text is 'power'-ful, in that as fiction it acquires the status of an ideology, without exposing itself to the critique of the discourse of reason: its 'accidents' whether in plot or emphasis, inclusion or omission, have no need to justify themselves. Yet the text is also 'fiction'-al in this appearance of or claim to invulnerability: the reader is not precluded from staging a challenge to fictional 'accidents'. Michel Foucault suggests that we give a text/author authority due to our fear of 'the proliferation of meaning'.⁴¹ The feminine is implicated in that very notion of proliferation: a taunting/ attractive reminder that there is a possibility of something else apart from the One - and that is the feminine. To uncover the precariousness of both identity and meaning is a crucial aspect of the feminist challenge to dismantle a whole world of received 'norms', and to uncover the fictiveness of the power of authority.

My use of the term feminine here, and its relation to the goals of feminism and feminist critical practice demands brief clarification. In the specific context of language and writing, the feminine is that which undermines and/or exceeds the limits of articulated, apparently stable meaning. (I expand this idea towards the end of the following chapter.) In this instance, its meaning corresponds to Julia Kristeva's treatment of the feminine as a *marginalised*, shifting position within the varying

definitives of the patriarchal order.⁴² The feminine is not a quality attributable only to females but to any marginalised, silenced or repressed position within the dominant order. Feminine readings are involved and delight in the profusion of visions projected by those myriad positions.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, when women's struggle for enfranchisement, and for the reorganisation of their personal and social lives generally, was at stake, the broader, conventional use of the term feminine - a static, passive, and apparently (conventionally) essential attribute of the biological female - had (understandably) overwhelmingly negative connotations for feminists. (West's own use of the word through her writing has generally perjorative connotations.) Julia Kristeva describes the women's movement of the early period as 'deeply rooted in the socio-political life of nations'. For feminists it meant gaining a place in history and involved 'the rejection, when necessary, of the attributes traditionally considered feminine or maternal in so far as they [were] deemed incompatible with insertion in that history'⁴³. Her words recall Mary Jacobus's reference to the 'conservative aim' of the suffragettes quoted above, and reiterates their acceptance of certain social and cultural structures as given and universal. Nevertheless, West herself reminds me of the flexible ideology of feminism, whose principles of definition depend so crucially on (a provisional) positionality, time and context. Feminism upholds 'a claim of women that they should, if they want to, be different from what women have always been alleged to be. It is a repudiation of the obligation to follow a certain pattern if you are a woman'.⁴⁴ It involves the critical and vigilant evaluation of power relations, the recognition of marginal positions, and a readjustment of

their relative place(s) in culture; it motivates the adoption of, or sympathy to, a perspective different to that of the dominant view: in favour of visions of plurality. Thus the feminine need not signify subordination or objectification, but can become an empowering challenge to the status quo.

The fictional texts are constituted through an exchange of disputing authorities: structural, narrative and thematic. The feminist reader, through her engagement with the text, challenges the fictional power of its authority. I propose to read authority as a medium of performance in the texts: as a constructed and constructing dynamic of narrative power, and as the product of a relationship of exchange between and within gendered subjects. Evaluating the term authority always in relation to what is other to it, other to the text, forces it into immediate and present process, rather than allowing it to rest as some as some abstract principle, in a position of straightforward, unmediated fictional 'meaning', established and petrified through tradition: convention, respectability, the *already*.

West wrote through decades characterised by domestic, social, sexual, political and economic upheaval. Her very first novel *The Return of the Soldier*, published in 1918, for example, and set during World War I, confronts the complex of all these issues. Notably, though she was writing fiction until shortly before her death, none of her published narratives focuses on the period beyond 1929, the year of the Wall Street crash, and described by Julia Kristeva as the year when 'the nation - dream and reality of the nineteenth century - seems to have reached both its apogee and its limits'.⁴⁵ West also marks out 1933 as a significant date: 'Life

wasn't clear to us at all'.⁴⁶ The disturbing political movements in Europe, particularly the rise of fascism, and economic instability contributed to the atmosphere of insecurity.

West's fictional narratives are rooted in the personal, social and material exigencies of (generally middle class) women's lives, and their relation to a broader cultural and historical arena. The texts express a desire to articulate, to understand the (often conservative) place of the female subject in specific historical (fictional) contexts.⁴⁷

On 1 November 1930, West married the banker, Henry Andrews. To Victoria Glendinning, West described her marriage as 'the job I was born to do, and I did it'.⁴⁸ West had achieved the social respectability she craved. In 1933, Virginia Woolf, writing to Ethel Smyth, described Henry Andrews as 'dead, though excellent mutton', and West as 'turned formal society, polite'.⁴⁹ Later, in 1939, after a visit from West, Woolf wrote to Vita Sackville-West of West: 'but why so prosperous and fat? And why this dillydallying with the world and the flesh?'⁵⁰ After five years of marriage the Andrews had no further sexual relations; West was deeply unhappy and dissatisfied with the situation, although as far as the public was concerned, she and Henry continued to live as a devoted couple until his death in 1968.

West's collection of four short stories, *The Harsh Voice*, published in 1935, offers an acidly cynical view of marriage and male/female relations.

Nevertheless, for West the ritual convention of marriage symbolised the necessary effort to reconcile the opposition between men and women. This is why, although she had many homosexuals as close friends, her writing is riddled with an express revulsion of a sexuality it perceives as the transgressive adulteration of a manageable binary complementarity. In *Family Memories*, for example, she wrote that 'it is wrong to encourage men to seek sexual fulfilment of a sort widely considered abnormal and therefore likely to isolate them under special stress'.⁵¹

While a vehement critique of the practice of (self) sacrifice abounds in West's non-fiction writing, her fictional texts confront the tension which (dis)locates the female subject, as dissatisfied but secure, and (mis)recognised in her role as the victim of sacrifice. Her desire and fear

of relinquishing this position, albeit a heavily compromised one, as the idealized object of a masculine fantasy as mother/wife/lover, of the emblematic reflection of the 'truth' of the patriarchal order, and as the guarantor of its authority, is made urgent by the exposure of the phallacy of that very order and its claim to authority.⁵²

(Re)making sense of her life as an independent woman and feminist (Glendinning comments that by the 1920s West 'had become a role-model for radical, independent women'⁵³) was contradicted by her dependence for her sense of herself - of her value, self-esteem, contentment - on a man; on his love for her and the security of identity that that provided. Her novel of 1922, *The Judge*, deals with just such issues. In 1924 she complained to her sister, Winnie that men 'sit and gaze at me with adoration at parties and go away and talk about me rapturously as the most marvellous woman on earth - but they refrain from taking any steps about it whatsoever.... It's obvious that men are terrified of me. I can't imagine why. I loathe life without a boof'[man].⁵⁴ Men felt threatened by West because she didn't conform to that masculine image of the feminine; one which, however dazzling and attractive, could still be mastered and controlled,

Gender identity was a crucial issue for West because it affected her reception by her contemporaries, her self-image as a private and public individual, and influenced her work as a writer. A binary system of gender imposes an ill-fitting straitjacket as well as attempting to disguise its real ambiguities, which are cultured and flexible. Max Beerbohm, the writer and caricaturist, drew a sketch of West around 1916, for his friend, G.B. Shaw, having read some of her articles, but without ever having seen her. He portrays her as a woman wearing the trousers; with a Virginia Woolf-like profile in a three-piece, pin-striped suit.⁵⁵

In the confident mood which preceded West's marriage to Henry Andrews, she wrote *Harriet Hume*, which was published in 1929; this comic fantasy plays with the notion of gender polarities. Yet, she was perplexed and often disturbed by her own complex of masculinity / femininity.

Joan Rivière's essay, also published in 1929, 'Womanliness as Masquerade' appears to express West's own anxiety. Rivière contends that 'womanliness' is a mask assumed by women to hide their fundamental masculinity, 'and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it'. She argues that there is no difference between 'genuine womanliness' and 'the "masquerade"'.⁵⁶ Late in her life, West expressed a similar attitude privately. Glendinning relates how in one of her notebooks she wrote that

'most women do "become" men as they get older, only the clever ones conceal it'.⁵⁷ Similarly, Carl Jung (whom Glendinning perceives as sharing some of the prejudices of his age and tradition with West) argued in 1927, that 'neither politically, nor economically, nor spiritually is [woman] a factor of visible importance. If she were, she would loom more largely in man's field of vision and would have to be considered a rival. Sometimes she is seen in this role, but only as a man, so to speak, who is accidentally a woman'.⁵⁸

The confusing ambiguities of a dualistic world view were attractively conceptualised for West through the doctrinal myth of Manicheanism; the myth provided a pivot for much of her thought and writing. She explained this (heretical) doctrine as 'not so much a religion as a work of art',⁵⁹ and she expounded it through the myth woven by its creator, Mani, in the third century AD.

Passionately Mani created a myth that would show the universe as a field for moral effort: inspired by Christianity as it had passed through the filter of many Oriental minds and by a cosmology invented by an Aramaic astronomer, he imagined that there had been in the beginning of time a Kingdom of light and a Kingdom of darkness existing side by side without any commixture, and that these had later been confused, as the result of aggression on the part of darkness. This was the origin of the present world, which Mani very aptly called the Smudge. It became the duty of all men who were on the side of light, which was identified with virtue and reason, to recover the particles

of light that have become imprisoned in the substance of darkness, which was identified with vice and brutishness.⁶⁰

This 'beautiful myth' was West's dream and despair: the (im)possibility of a neat division, which she believed so nearly 'corresponds to a basic fantasy of the human mind [which] is shown by its tendency to reappear spontaneously in age after age'.⁶¹ She illustrated the recurrence of this myth in its various guises in a series of lectures (extended and published as *The Court and the Castle* in 1957) discussing religious, moral and political ideas as they are produced in literature.

St. Augustine, West's short biography of the saint, who for a time himself followed the doctrine of Manicheism, was published in 1933. In her biography of West, Victoria Glendinning makes an explicit connection between Augustine's relationship with his mother Monnica, and West's with her son Anthony.⁶² Certainly in both sets of relationships the son's closeness to and involvement with the mother later moves to a rejection of her in favour of the respected but more distant father. Anthony West's respectful biography of his father, *H.G. Wells: A Life*, and his malicious treatment of his mother in *Heritage* maps the difference in his attitude towards his parents. Although it was Rebecca who was his principal guardian (his 'aunt', until he was about twelve years old), 'Wellsie' (who also acknowledged his parenthood to his son at that time) was the focus of Anthony's sympathy and admiration. The problems of the relationship between mother and son became more bitter and acrimonious as the years went on, and the emotional strain of their very public private wrangles damned up much of Rebecca's productivity as a writer.

In West's fiction the text's dominant ideology, a model of paternal authority, is persistently challenged by the explorative approach of the writer / reader who earns disinheritance by calling out (ex-ploring) her claim to a subjectivity which identifies the text's difference from itself.

Isabelle, the principal character in *The Thinking Reed*, West's novel of 1936, and closely aligned with her third person narrator, muses on the

tradition of women's omission from a textual past and present. The narrator simultaneously writes her out and writes her into the (future) text in which she predicts herself as 'unrecorded'.

But what was happening to her now would go unrecorded, it would be shut up with her in her grave and would be dust when she was dust. Well, if it was so it must be so. 'But surely', she thought, 'there is something extraordinary, something abnormal about women's lives'. But how could women's lives be extraordinary or abnormal since there are more women than men and they have always led the same sort of lives? They are in the majority, time has approved, why should there be this feeling of oddness, of incongruity? It was perhaps because every inch of a woman's life as she lived it struck her as astonishing, either because nothing like what she was experiencing had ever been recorded, or because it had been recorded only falsely and superficially, with a lacuna where the real poignancy lay.

(TR, 134)

This tension is also demonstrated in the text as a (w)hole: the silences and omissions, the losses which allow the singular 'order' and 'harmony' of narrative forms, can be defined as an organizational strategy of textual sacrifice. Throughout this century feminists have argued against the sacrifice of women - in their roles as wives, lovers and mothers, as wage earners, and in terms of their sexuality. A range of feminist criticism has shown who has regularly paid for this order and harmony, and for the (de)meaning of the feminine. In her non-fiction writing, West frequently

remarked on the destructive pattern by which women sacrificed a sense of their own value, of themselves, in deference to a masculine authority. The issue of female sacrifice is still something against which women struggle at the end of the twentieth century. And as Julia Kristeva pointed out, in an essay of 1979, 'the new generation of women is showing that its major social concern has been the socio-symbolic contract as a sacrificial contract ... women today are affirming - and we consequently face a mass phenomenon - that they are forced to experience this sacrificial contract against their will'.⁶³

West's fictional texts, which re-enact the ritual sacrifice of the feminine to its conventionally restrictive definition, and of women to a male dominated culture in both the texts' formal structure and in the course of their plots, do so in order to survive conventionally, generically, familiarly.⁶⁴ As Nancy K. Miller comments, 'the fictions of desire behind the desiderata of fiction are masculine and not universal constructs ... the maxims that pass for the truth of human experience, and the encoding of that experience in literature, are organisations, when they are not fantasies, of the dominant culture. To read women's literature is to see and hear repeatedly a chafing against the "unsatisfactory reality"'.⁶⁵

Many of West's fictional female characters are celebrated for their restorative, regenerative powers of loving and giving to others.⁶⁶ And yet, West, writing in *The Clarion* in 1913, also disputed the 'claim to halos for women: for a halo is the only thing I have ever heard of that gives out light yet needs no fuel'.⁶⁷

By foregrounding the challenge to the practice of sacrifice which the fiction also writes, by refusing the sacredness which the master plots claim in the offering of victims, the feminist critic draws attention to the disorder and the violence involved in that process, and the energy of the (both implicit and explicit) protests through which that sacrifice to a dubious authority is constitutively enacted, performed. George Bataille's pertinent comment makes the point graphically: 'A sacrifice is a novel, a story, illustrated in a bloody fashion'.⁶⁸

In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), her monumental travelogue, and a history (discursive and narrative) of the Balkan states, written in response to visits to Yugoslavia in the late 1930s with her husband Henry, West repeatedly denounces the tradition and ritual practice of sacrifice for the purposes of either personal, political or religious ideology, implicating herself in the criticism:

'There I had learnt how infinitely disgusting in its practice was the belief that by shedding the blood of an animal one will be granted increase; that by making a gift to death one will receive the gift of life. There I had realised that the belief was a vital part of me, because it was dear to the primitive mind, since it provided an easy answer to various perplexities, and the primitive mind is the foundation on which the modern mind is built. This belief is not only hideous in itself; it pollutes the works of love'.⁶⁹

Recognition of such an alterity, an otherness - the text being something in excess of its dominant pattern - is, in effect, a productive betrayal of the position which stands for the uniqueness of the one.

The punchy, taut writing which characterises West's early social, political and literary journalistic challenge, gave way during the inter- and post-war years to writing which, while still vivid, took the discursive form of orderly plot narratives, and grappled particularly with the subjects of treason and the rule of state law. Her apparent move to the political right (which she denied, believing that the tenets of socialism had been betrayed by communism⁷⁰) was paralleled by her growing feelings of being undermined by familial and other acts of treachery against her: in both instances, a consoling unity was spoiled.

During the 1940s much of West's writing included reportage on crime. In 1946 she reported for the *Daily Telegraph* on the Nuremberg trials. During 1945 she had covered the trial of Lord Haw Haw for the *New Yorker*; this, together with the writing on the Nazi war crime trials and

other articles and reports on wartime traitors was published as *The Meaning of Treason* in 1947. In the same year, she spent time in the United States, and while there reported on a trial concerning a lynching; this was later collected and published with other articles as *A Train of Powder* in 1955. In all these pieces, while notions of loyalty and truth are questioned, they ultimately defer to the respect of an impersonal but regulatory state mechanism which has the power to order and control.

In the 1940s and 1950s West was expressing fears about the threat of Communism and was heavily criticised for her defence of the McCarthy witch hunts. While she described him as a 'stupid and violent demagogue',⁷¹ West supported his actions as having been a reaction of 'curiosity when faced with such intimations of disorder',⁷²

In 1943 West began working on the novel that was to be published in 1966 as *The Birds Fall Down*, a narrative of espionage, double agents and treachery.

West, writing in a specifically national and political context said that

There is a case for the traitor. He is a sport from a necessary type. The relationship between man and his fatherland is always disturbed if either man or fatherland be highly developed. A man's demands for liberty must at some point challenge the limitations the state imposes on the individual for the sake of the masses; and if he is to carry on the national tradition he must wrestle with those who, claiming to be traditionalists, desire to crystallize it at the point reached by the previous generation. It is our duty to readjust constantly the balance between public and private liberties. Men must be capable of imagining and executing and insisting on social change, if they are to reform or even maintain civilisation, and capable too of furnishing the rebellion which is sometimes necessary if society is not to perish of immobility. Therefore all men should have a drop of treason in their veins if the nations are not to go soft like so many sleepy pears.⁷³

Treason, as dis-loyalty, moving away from implicit and unqualified trust, is necessary practice for the feminist reader who consciously takes on the role of producer of textual meanings. Treason as a (figurative) movement to depose the head of state - that is, the claim to authority - suggests the (artistic, political) necessity to uncover the instability of apparently coherent and self-sufficient ideologies and structures.

In the process of re-reading, the terms treason and treachery demand redefinition: they must come to suggest activities motivated by a necessity to challenge dominant perspectives, to seek out those which are under-represented or obscured.⁷⁴ By mortgaging oneself to the former understanding of the terms, one implicitly acknowledges where allegiance *lawfully* lies.

2.

**Telling stories:
narrating, covering, discovering**

The equation of narrative with meaning is mediated by
the agency of desire.¹

Meaningful narratives

Whose desire, whose narrative and whose meaning are at stake here? These are crucial questions of power, of gender, and of pleasure which the present chapter explores. In an essay of 1931, West distinguished women writers as 'put[ting] into their pages the conflicts of individuals, and themselves and their environments', but recording them 'with a preference for harmony rather than revolt'.² As I remarked in the previous chapter, this harmony is often expensively bought as far as women and their (mis)representations in literary texts are concerned, and the very notion of harmony thereby rendered dubious. Nevertheless, the harmony is necessarily coincident with some kind of revolt; it is their contradictions that I consider below.

West's art is both explanation (representing the closure which characterises the dominant discourse of the realist text) and exploration (enacting modernism's famed resistance or problematising of an ending), the former always an attempt to define, make static, the incessant movement of the latter, writing 'to find out what I know about something and what is to be known about something'.³ In terms of

explanation, the art object, according to West, lays down 'the absolute truth' about a particular situation: 'we are by that much more completely masters of reality than we were'.⁴ Here the text is perceived as a finite form, and the readers - gendered as masculine - uncovering unequivocal knowledge obtain (or reaffirm) their sense of cohesive power, becoming 'masters of reality', party to literary authority. And yet this power is circumscribed (written around). The reader in this position is implicitly cast as the privileged but passive consumer of truth. However, textual (re)readings are matters of process, depending on an exchange between text and reader, which means that patterns will change, depending on time and context. West acknowledges this exchange when she remarks that 'criticism is a process that ought to be continuous'.⁵ And Annette Kolodny sums up the point with her comment that 'we appropriate meaning from a text according to what we need (or desire) ... And we appropriate different meanings, or report different gleanings, at different times - even from the same text - according to our changed assumptions, circumstances and requirements'.⁶

Realism, or classic realism, as it is also described, has repeatedly been analysed as a conservative form, in its function as an authoritative reaffirmation of the harmonic status quo - leaving women, for example, where they are, in their 'proper' place. Catherine Belsey's definition of classic realism illustrates the point.

Classic realism is characterised by 'illusionism', narrative which leads to 'closure' and a 'hierarchy of discourses' which establishes the 'truth' of the story ... the story

moves inevitably towards closure which is also disclosure, the dissolution of enigma through the re-establishment of order, recognisable as a reinstatement or a redevelopment of the order which is understood to have preceded the events of the story itself.⁷

As an addendum to this definition I think it is important to reiterate the point (made by Belsey herself) that any so-called realist text is a construct, albeit one apparently designed for transparent readings. In her critique of the notion of a definable and distinctive feminist aesthetics, Rita Felski cogently questions the simplistic opposition of modernist writing as subversive, and realist writing as conservative. She argues that 'radical impulses are not inherent in the formal properties of texts; they can be realized only through interactions between texts and readers'.⁸ She makes a case for literature as not merely 'a self-referential and metalinguistic system', but also as 'a medium which can profoundly influence individual and cultural understanding in the sphere of everyday life, charting the changing preoccupations of social groups through symbolic fictions by means of which they make sense of experience'.⁹

There is a level, therefore, on which the apparent transparency of the discourse in a realist text is valuable. Only by having conditional (tentative or lingering) faith in the discourse, by identifying with or recognising the narrative context, does the reader feel it worthwhile entering into dialogue and dispute with its different (possibly silent)

voice(s) in the first place. To re-read West's fiction the feminist reader enacts the dichotomy: acknowledging *and* deconstructing meanings.

My readings perceive a tension between the realist structure or contexts of West's narratives (with the one exception of *Harriet Hume*) on the one hand, and a modernist sensibility which both informs and disrupts them on the other.¹⁹ While modernism as an aesthetic and philosophical form has proved an attractive medium to women writers - in its innovative foregrounding of subjectivity, in its collapsing of the boundaries between subject and object, in its refusal of obedience to a slavish linearity - it is difficult to imagine its singular, unproblematic application to and revolution of women's practical day-to-day lives during the first decades of the twentieth century. Unquestionably it is of vital importance that the modernist movement articulated a different, feminine, hitherto marginalised perspective - one common to women, and offered the potential for the revaluation and expression of a myriad views. Nevertheless, for West it seems to have been significant also to represent an inherited world with which many women would have been familiar as apparently meaningful and ordered, even if it was one with which their relationship had been distinctly uneasy and dissatisfying.

In *The Judge*, West's second novel of 1922, the young suffragette, Ellen Melville, is attracted by thoughts of the power and privilege which the mainstream, patriarchal path affords; yet her imagination is also distracted by the vital life on the wayside. Early in the narrative, jealous of the active life which Richard is privileged to enjoy, she regards him as a king who possesses the key to knowledge and experience.

The extract reproduced below in which she pictures him in Rio, his former home, can be read as a metaphor for the the authority of the traditional narrative realist form which hierarchises and delimits path and wayside, project and destination. Its source of power comes from its presumption of and claim to possession of a known, familiar, (masculine) past. It also accounts for the difference in focus constructed through the writing and (re)reading of the gendered fictional text. Ellen can re-vision a romantically detailed and colourful narrative from which she is absent as subject, one in which the only women present are those she identifies as 'hateful feminine women', dancing objects ~~for~~ Richard's pleasure; the experience of such revision (re-reading) is a complex both one of vicarious (mimetic) pleasure and frustration at her own exclusion. The process is further complicated by the degree of collusion or identification between narrator and character. In the case of this fictional text, the third person narrator's relation to Ellen, frequently shifting between positions of empathy and gentle irony, precludes the reader from 'resting' with Ellen's position as stable or definitive.

Everywhere he would meet men whom he had captained on desperate adventures, who over wine would point ringed fingers at mountain ranges and whisper of forgotten mines and tempt him to adventures that would take him away from her for ever so long. Every where he would meet women, hateful feminine women of the sort who are opposed to Woman Suffrage, who, because of some past courtesy of his, would throw him roses and try to make him watch their dancing

feet. She sobbed with rage as she perceived how different from her the possession of this past made him. When he reached Rio he would not stand by the quiet bay as she would have stood, enraptured by the several noble darknesses of the sky, the mountains, and the ship-starred sea, but would go quickly to his house on the hill, not hurrying, but showing by a lightness in his walk, by a furtive vivacity of his body, that he was involved in some private system of exciting memories. He would open the wrought iron gates with a key which she had not known he possessed, which had lain close to him in one of those innumerable pockets that men have in their clothes. With perfect knowledge of the path, he would step silently through the garden, where flowers run wild had lost their delicacy and grew as monstrous candelabra of coarsened blooms in soil greenly feculent with weeds; she rejoiced in its devastation. He would enter the hall and pick his steps between the pools of wine that lay black on the marble floor; he would tread on the rosettes of corruption that had once been garlands of roses hung about the bronze whale's neck; he would look down on the white limbs of the shattered Venus, and look up and listen to the creaking flight of the birds of prey that were nesting under the broken roof; and he would smile as if he shared a secret with the ruin and dissipation. His smile was the sun, but in it there was always a dark ray of secrecy. All his experience was a mockery of her inexperience. Her clenched fist beat her brow which had become hot... (J, 139).

Women writing women into realist narratives have traditionally been faced with the arduous task of writing women into their 'right' place. The number of re-readings of nineteenth and twentieth century realist novels by women is testimony to how often the 'right' place might be a variety of different places for (subsequent, contemporary and future) feminist readers/critics. Resisting the authoritative meaning offered by the narrative line as definitive, they have sought their significances elsewhere. Ellen's refusal of complete identification with a masculine story (whose 'meaning' would be her self-abnegation), and her consequent attraction and attention to the path's 'corruption' is a challenge to the claim of masculine originality. West once commented that art helped her to 'go on living' by making her 'fate different from what it appears, different, not lamentable, grandiose'.¹¹ Her insistence on difference here alerts the reader to read for the (sexual) differences in her texts, the difference of the fate (*fatum* - the spoken) from itself, and from its unspoken, its unknown.¹²

The passage images the teleological framework of a narrative whose powerful myth claims to contain a source, a centre, a key, which is made alluring and attractive to a young woman such as Ellen precisely because it can be possessed only by a privileged (male) elite. The dominant narrative discourses of West's texts, for example, lay out a pattern - a powerful ideology of meaning.¹³ The word pattern derives from the French term *patron* which, in turn, finds its source in the Latin, *pater*, meaning father. The desire of the father (the patron who pays for his desires to be written and so provides a place for his daughter-writer in the social order; the woman writer who desires and seeks to emulate/

mimic the paternal word) has determined the teleological framework within which a specific convention of order and meaning is defined in realist fiction.¹⁴ Other discourses - different patterns which refuse allegiance to the father's patter(n) - challenge and disrupt that dominant narrative, by drawing attention to their text(ure), the material of the fabric(ation).

Terry Eagleton, discussing the 'pattern' of classical narrative, comments that here 'an original settlement is disrupted and ultimately restored. From this viewpoint, narrative is a source of consolation'.¹⁵ Settlement and restoration, origin and end, are terms constituting this dominant narrative discourse / ideology. The 'consolation' referred to, then, is a comfort to the identity finding itself affirmed in *that* discourse: explaining it, legitimising it. The feminist writer, adopting the classic realist model would appear to be acknowledging, at least formally, the viability of extant social order, even if she is dissatisfied with women's 'place' in it. For women particularly, under patriarchy, the consolation and the discomfiture are (in writing / reading) experienced in confusion.¹⁶

Through her reading of Richard's textual past, in fictional pursuit of her imaginative ambitions, Ellen can also perceive how she would trace it differently, halting the linearity to look around, upwards, outwards. In her essay, 'Women's time', Julia Kristeva discusses how early feminists and suffragists 'aspired to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history'. She distinguishes these women from post '68 feminists and women whom she describes as having had 'an aesthetic

or psychoanalytic experience'. Within the latter group 'linear temporality has been almost totally refused'.¹⁷ While Rebecca West might certainly be placed within the first group, she is not out of place in the second either. In West's writing the forces of linearity and those which constitute its refusal are combatant.

The various disruptions of both the directional impulses, and of their endings in West's narrative texts, problematise the notions of reality and articulation, which MacCabe argues the classic realist text treats as transparencies.¹⁸ The classic pattern of the plot narratives never holds up / out / together: their teleological impulses are always thwarted somehow, as they wander off the marked path to explore (cry out). Endings unwillingly intern (turn in) desire (*The Return of the Soldier*), nostalgically re-imagine their beginnings (*The Abiding Vision*), cannot articulate their project of desire (*Sunflower*), cannot fulfil their schematised plans (*Cousin Rosamund*), or must argue about them (*The Thinking Reed*), fantasise immortality (*Harriet Hume*), or knowingly delude themselves into an optimistic future (*The Birds Fall Down*).¹⁹ In connection with a discussion of Iris Murdoch's fiction and its imposition of order, West commented that 'The philosophic search for order was not unconnected with the "happy ending", which novelists have used since the beginning of their art, and is sometimes wishful thinking of the crudest sort and sometimes a real celebration of harmony'.²⁰ My readings find a multitude of unfulfilled wishes, and interrogate the apparent harmonies posited by West's fictions.

The authoritative classical form through and towards which Richard makes his way is broken: 'the shattered Venus' signifying the feminine reflection of masculine notions of beauty, harmony and love destroyed. The authority of the classic, with its emphasis on 'pure' form and 'clean' lines places the feminine and women at the borders; or views them (as it does here) as the epitomised petrified (statuesque) reflection of its own imagined pure form - giving the border the *illusion* of the place of the centre.²¹ While the image of this authority is shattered, its effects are still powerful: and the feminine, now an object image, dismembered and 'looked down' on by masculine eyes. Implicit in the lines is also a sense of wildness: the glut which threatens to overwhelm the path. The 'corruption' luxuriously depicted. Ellen 'rejoiced in its devastation', identifying with the corruption, the difference from the path.

West once pointed out that 'the artist's work is often a palimpsest on which are superimposed several incompatible views about his subject; and it may be that which is expressed with the greatest intensity, which his deeper nature finds the truest, is not that which has determined the narrative form he has given to it'.²² Many years later, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar used the term palimpsest to describe the double-voiced discourse characterizing women's writing of the nineteenth century - one which contains both a dominant and a muted story.²³ It seems to me that the two (or more) stories cannot be distinguished as false (patriarchal) - the dominant story, whose truth is a lie we are expected to passively accept; and real (authentic, true to women, essential) - the muted story in whose production we willingly play an active role. Both have direct

and significant influence in the constituting of texts which articulate women's experiences, thoughts and beliefs, hopes and fantasies. It is the power struggle between the two with which this chapter is primarily concerned.

Richard is the possessor of the key, and yet his apparent complicity with the ruin of dissipation disturbs the constructed limits, contradicts the ideology that differentiates in order to produce and sustain its strength. In a position of 'knowing' power, Richard can reject the key's claimed monopoly on hidden 'truth', meaning, value etc. By contrast, the placing of Ellen is such that she cannot reject the 'key' until she has discovered for herself the mythical quality of its attractive power. 'How many of her stern-browed ambitions, how much of her virile swagger of life, were not the intention of her own soul, but had been suggested to her by an old woman who liked to pretend her daughter was a son' (J,44). Comparably, West's own fictional forms are 'suggested' by her socio-historical and cultural place; in other words, history as an externally determinable context and locale of material conditions furnishes the focus of interest for West's writing. By extension, Stephen Heath, in *The Sexual Fix* comments that 'the structure of my desire is the structure of my history'.²⁴ In this sense, history suggests narrative: the manner, form and order in which the externally determinable circumstances are (re)produced as coherent and meaningful by the dominant order, and thereby construct the desire (the lack) which West's fictional forms also seek to satisfy. Her praise of women writers who do not take masculine values as the basis of their work, reflects

the complexity of women's places in history and their (his)stories of desire.

These women say quietly to the gentleman that is at every feminine elbow 'Yes, I know, *but ...*' There is in them a determination to build up the work of art out of the bricks that are in the universe that women know, and not to borrow any bricks that are in the universe that men know, however much these might be admired. The resultant work of art is different in essence from man's.²⁵

The '"Yes, *but ...*"' expresses both the concession and the contradiction. The differentiation between 'women' and 'feminine elbow' points to the split: the women writing (and of course reading) reconstruct the feminine fantasy of masculine desire, *but* they desire something else too - some other pleasures, some other meanings. Nevertheless, most of West's texts do on one level acknowledge the authoritative position of conformity and conservatism, through modelling themselves along classic (phallic) lines. The texts read her classic realist precursors into her writing: wanting / desiring / lacking the path. And yet, they also renounce, challenge and transgress its limits. The illusion of identity and wholeness afforded by the form, produces (provisional) pleasure, the authority of which is challenged by a significant energy of other texts; these texts resist solidity and comprise those forces of social, sexual, political and economic upheaval around which the novels focus their attention, and on which they imprint a claim to order.

Through the introduction to the texts which follows I open areas of discussion which will be developed in subsequent chapters. At the risk of falling into a reductive trap of 'explaining' the texts, by a brief resumé of how they are presented and the plots they articulate, my aim is to show how, to repeat Nancy K. Miller's words, they 'chafed against "unsatisfactory reality"',²⁶ against their formal and conventional limits, and, in addition, refuse or contradict their conclusions. I will also discuss the significance of narrative linearity in respect of the individual texts: its manifestations, deviations and contradictions. Brief detail in contextual background to the texts' production is also provided. The chapter will conclude with an examination of the processes of the symbolic and semiotic in West's narrative fiction. The texts are not necessarily treated chronologically, but I do pay attention to the features of relationship between texts. West once remarked that there has to be a connection between one book and another, 'or you're not really writing are you?'.²⁷

Two of West's texts offer a useful introduction into a feminist re-reading of her other fictional writing. The ubiquitous fissures which crack the teleological lines of West's fiction are boldly highlighted by *Harriet Hume* and a short story, 'The Abiding Vision'.²⁸ Both texts (differently) parody the classic realist form. In each case the text is narrated (in the third person) through a male perspective. (In no other of West's fiction is a male position assumed more than briefly). The distance between the narrator and the character perspective is marked by a tone that is unashamedly ironic. The ironic tone prescribes a readerly

position, encourages the reader's practice of treachery, the reading strategy outlined in the previous chapter.

***Harriet Hume* and 'The Abiding Vision'**

'Only an hour's crazy entertainment',²⁹ according to West, *Harriet Hume* was published in 1929. West based the novel's heroine on a visual memory of her friend, the pianist Harriet Cohen, waving to West from the balcony of a house in Regent's Park Terrace, looking 'exquisitely in accord with Nash's London ... I had a sense that time was being spun about her which I tried to express in a book named *Harriet Hume*'.³⁰ West defined this text as 'a fantasy not a novel'.³¹ Perhaps the difference between the fantasy and the novel form, if one can be distinguished at all, lies in the *foregrounded* issue of the instability of narrative in the former, where the multiplicity of meaning is explicitly *flaunted*.

The fictional mode of fantasy foregrounds the problematic notion of authority. Here there appears to be an almost insistent doubling or dissemination of power between the text produced by the author and that by an individual reader, the latter being *required* to imagine her own meaning and value on to the text.³² The possibility of extracting a monological meaning / reading is collapsed. When authority is conceived of as a system of value, a body of knowledge, it claims definition and delimitation to afford its recognition as such. Fantasy deconstructs the security of an authoritative frame, compelling the reader to repeatedly and differently write and relativise the text for herself: admit the privacy of the public. While the functions of subjectivity and the

individual value / meaning systems of both reader and author are heightened, the hierarchical relationship between text and reader disintegrates into the potential of connected realms of different meanings / readings. Rosemary Jackson makes the point succinctly. 'Fantasy establishes, or discovers, an absence of separating distinctions, violating a "normal" or common sense perspective which represents reality as constituted by discrete but connected units. Fantasy is preoccupied with limits, with limiting categories and with their projected association'.³³ From this perspective, *Harriet Hume* can readily be appropriated as a mode of fantasy. Nevertheless this label (any label) will sit askew on a text which also, despite its blurred limits both posits conventionally essentialist and absolute positions of constrained social and sexual identities (female-feminine / male-masculine; private / public), and yet mocks their delusory ideality through a pervasively playful tone of comic irony. In a text which is a product of and indeed deals with a historical and social context that distinguishes the personal from the political, one class from another, men from women, through oppressive division, the contradictory impulses of essentialism and fluidity are powerfully felt.

The narrative is set in the 1920s in London, and depicts the inherent contrasts of, on the one hand, a social façade of conventionality and apparently efficient government which exercises a (corrupt) controlling power, and on the other, of the oppression of what it claims as marginal, negative, evil, or merely superfluous and redundant. Public and political themes mirror the novel's corresponding (foregrounded) personal and psychological concerns.

The novel comprises a linear narrative which traces (predominantly through the ironically filtered third person perspective of Arnold) the political rise and fall, not of its title character, as might be supposed, but of Arnold Condorex, her occasional lover. Harriet Hume, by contrast serves the playful illusion of the traditional 'feminine' (whose inconsistency is taken as a mark of her constancy).³⁴ She is represented as a classic art object or artefact (who can be 'fitted' - frozen - into the period style of eighteenth century architecture - 'Nash's London') as well as a seductively elusive and unidentifiable 'long scarf of spirit' (HH,11). The story of her career as a professional pianist and her failure to become a popular success is treated as secondary to the vagaries of Arnold's life and career. The text is divided into five sections, each one marking a meeting between its main characters.

The first scene opens in Harriet's flat where she and Arnold have been making love. She is a beautiful young pianist, ethereal and dreamy, an artistic individual. He is a budding and ambitious politician, whose classical features reflect a mind seeking to conform to those principles of restraint and order. While Harriet leaves the room briefly, Arnold amuses himself by examining her trinkets and photographs, and thinking idly as he enjoys his reflection in the mirror. When Harriet re-enters, she delights in telling Arnold exactly what he has been doing and thinking during her absence.³⁵ While he, half horrified, is almost incredulous of 'such miracles of thought' (HH,32), Harriet explains the phenomenon as a feature of their special bond. Their evening's pleasure is cut short, however, as Harriet again picks up Arnold's train of

thought which reveals that his ambition to rise in the world comes before any woman, even herself. In their subsequent and irregular meetings which span a period of twenty years, Harriet repeats the procedure of exposing the concerns which preoccupy Arnold's mind and lay the path of his future rise and fall: his plan to make a loveless marriage in the interests of his career; his plotting to usurp the leading members of his party; the imminence of his downfall as a result of his political treachery. Arnold is by turns doubtful, frustrated, angered and fearful of Harriet's power - what he had first described as a miracle becomes 'this infernal gift' (HH,163), the shift in interpretation reflecting the increasingly dark motives of his own dealings, and his valuation of Harriet's revelations as acts of treachery. The final section, a dream-like concoction, involves the spirits of Harriet and Arnold, now dead. In an alcoholic haze, Arnold is convinced that he must destroy his 'opposite' (HH,229), Harriet, in order to ensure his own survival. Having made his way to her house, his attempt to shoot her is foiled by two policeman, whom Harriet had summoned, intuiting Arnold's intention. In the process of discussion with Harriet, Arnold comes to regret his action and both he and Harriet admit their personal failings. They are thus reconciled and the novel ends with the policemen wishing them 'A Very Happy Eternity' (HH,288). *Harriet Hume* mocks its own self-assured teleology of professed self-enclosure through this in(de)finite conclusion: an ending which opens out to aesthetic infinity.

Most people are pleased enough when their lives can be counted as illustrative notes in the margin of what the

world decides to commemorate in print and are overjoyed when they are incorporated in the main text; but to Harriet, dear fool, that text could at most be a footnote to her own life, an amusing appendix to the vastly more important things that happened when she played the piano, bit into an apple, was hot, was cold (HH,17).

Arnold's text ('the world'), accords with what he reads: 'the world'; his wish is to be part of its body, 'incorporated'. Thus the main text is, in effect, 'a footnote' to the character of Harriet, 'an amusing appendix' to her characterisation, as well as the form produced in her name. Yet, as *form*, Harriet Hume is what Arnold Condorex wants - his lack figures as the name of a story in whose cause and effect she is absent except in direct relation to the subject position of Arnold and the way he (mis)perceives her. Harriet is cast as the reader of the traditional definitive text - Arnold's story - but ^{also} as the inscriber of the fairy tales with which she enthralls Arnold. Less seriously regarded as 'entertainment', the tales nevertheless give Arnold pleasure: he needs 'a fairy tale as a starving man needs food' (HH,88); the difference between Harriet's tales and Arnold's political fictionalising - 'Let Pondh be Mondh' (HH,71) - is negligible, however.

While the discourse has a historical position - the 1920s - different time scales are conflated into the local space that is London. The Edwardian era is recalled in the prevailing attitude of doubt and scepticism, in the parallels drawn between Roman and contemporary imperialism (their decadence and degeneracy), and in the interest in

supernatural and psychical phenomena.³⁶ Alternatively, Glendinning describes the novel as 'baroque' in matter and manner,³⁷ drawing attention to its gorgeous and ornamental language: the place of excess which the convention of classicism disallows.

Arnold Condorex's obsession with time: 'a man must have something to tell him where he is' (HH,36), and particularly with roads - 'ah how I love a straight road' (HH,246) - impels the linear narrative to report the path of his political rise and fall. Only in the last section does he find that 'this street I do not trust it! It is very long'. He is afraid that 'it has swung loose into the ether', and fears to find himself 'floundering up a rungless ladder in the skies ... for ever and ever' (HH,256). All that was teleologically solid is evaporated into absence.

In the text the third person narrator undermines the patriarchal vision it represents - its conventions, stereotypes, political framework - by assuming an ironic tone that mimics, does an impression of, the object of its ridicule. Luce Irigaray urges women to 'assume the feminine role deliberately' (a role which is already a mime), and to exaggerate the feminine (as an excess), in an attempt to recover 'the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it'.³⁸ The gap which the resultant irony sets up, the gap between the mimic and the mime, becomes the feminine space, the elsewhere of different meanings. The amused (bemused) laughter which the text arouses is 'the sign of our astonishment at this perpetual state of insecurity' (CR,177).

The ironic play in *Harriet Hume* around the complementarity of male and female, masculine and feminine, is particularly effective, for example, since irony, persistently countering the definitive statements of any such 'truths', emphasises the in-congruity, the not-meeting together, the not-wholeness, of 'opposites'.³² Instead, it points out the narcissistic impulse which idealises the Other for the purpose of obtaining a perfect reflection of the self. In the first section where Arnold is musing on the beauty of Harriet, he looks at his own reflection in the mirror and exclaims: 'Dear Harriet! Dear Harriet!'...and liked to see *his* handsomeness taking the words out of *his* mouth in the mirror (my italics, *HH*, 22). His eulogising of Harriet is, in effect, a compliment / complement to himself. Similarly, the 'feminine' name of the text is a cover for its narrative, masculine imprint, to which the former admits her credit: near the close of the narrative Harriet acknowledges the positive role of the politician (organiser of the social / textual). 'Tis the sturdy desire you have to shape the random elements of our existence into coherent patterns that is the pith and marrow of mankind.' (*HH*, 267).

And yet, the voice of irony (if not the narrator's then the responding voice of the reader) - the other of narrative straightforwardness, of direct transparency - tugs away at that cover, to reveal another place, another position.

The effects of irony obvious in *Harriet Hume* are discernible in varying degrees in most of West's writing - non-fiction as well as fiction, and particularly in 'The Abiding Vision'. This story was published in 1935,

five years after *Harriet Hume*, in a four-story collection, entitled *The Harsh Voice*. The themes of the two narratives are similar, in that both trace the career pattern of a male character and the effects of his professional life on his personal relationships.

Whose, is 'the abiding vision'? Whose is the sense of permanence? The formal neatness of the short story paradoxically draws insistent attention to the inherent unease and discomfort of those subjects, positions, experiences, and ideologies not accounted for on the articulated narrative level. The notion of vision - of textual form - as permanent, and of Woman as a reflection of that stability, as an object, is undercut by the very processes of re-reading the text.

Sam Hartley's vision opens and closes the story. In the first case the vision is of his wife Lulah, as he remembers her in her youth as 'a face unlined with care, smooth and shining flesh undepleted by self-sacrifice' (AV,189). The narrative's concluding vision is of Sam's mistress, Lily, as she was when he first knew her: 'a face unlined with care, a body still smooth and shining, undepleted by self-sacrifice, restorative with youth' (AV,251). Women become Woman. Sam's vision is one which, with repetitive monotony, strives to maintain a hold on the dominant narrative structure. The contradictory (re)visions, however, are those of Lily and Lulah, their faces masks, which nevertheless betray them as (largely unknown) abiding (suffering, patient) women. The plot sequence traces Sam's movement from a position of business success, public reputation, to a nadir of near financial ruin and embarrassment, and finally, to the prospect of re-entry into the risky but financially

prosperous commercial sphere. Sam reduces women to Woman in the final settling of his accounts. Yet in the process of financial wrangling, of business success, collapse, and finally, potential promise, the women are differentiated according to their place of value in his reckoning. In terms of social and financial process, the narrative follows a pattern of up - down - up. And yet the tone in which the development of the situation is narrated, together with the observation of the personal and individual lives involved, reveals a contradictory trend. When Sam and Lulah 'arrive' in New York at the start, Lulah collapses; when Sam looks forward with renewed optimism to a newly prosperous life at the conclusion, Lily is worn out by exhaustion. The story's 'result', then, is also the direct inverse of what, on one level, might be expected. The reader feels a sense of loss (at the witnessing of women's and men's lives worn thin by personal and financial problems) and of frustration (at the implication that the trend is to repeat itself). Sam's story ends where it began - with 'the abiding vision'. The woman's story remains unwritten but not unread. The re-visionist reader will encourage the silent voices - traitors to sacrifice - to speak up.

The pervasive tone of irony referred to above, is of thematic as well as structural significance. Early in the narrative, Sam reflects on his entry into business many years before with two friends.

He and Jim Leavensoe and Julius Geylor had ridden
a long way one day when they were young to see a
mountain, and then they had written a lot of letters,
with the result that the flanks of the mountain

and the flats in its shadow were harrowed up and
cancered with tall chimneys and puffing, ejaculating
factories, and then they had written a lot more letters
and had got rich. In the early hours it seemed to him
the connexion between the mountain and the letters
was too thin, and that someday somebody would notice
it, and that he had come into the racket too late
to be able to defend himself. (AV,191)

On a figurative level, the letters (of the narrative) build and develop
the mountain (its ideological discourse). The link between the letters
and the ideology they produce is always tenuous because fabricated. It
is thus vulnerable and necessarily subject to interrogation. While the
ideology may in some sense be productive - in that it makes plausible
and coherent a set of beliefs, values and ideas - it contains within
itself the seeds of its own de(con)struction. (Similarly, the mountain
under industrial development creates temporary wealth and security for
its owners, but impoverishes the lifestyle of its employees and their
physical environment).

The expression of progress through linear movement is, however, checked
by the hint of repetitious monotony and predictability - which
introduces an ominous overtone and, paradoxically, arouses Sam's doubts
about the machinery in operation. 'Their life went on and on, up and up.
One knew what to expect of each new day; more of what there had been
yesterday. Sam was surprised at his own corporation as their stocks
soared and soared and soared'. The rhythm of the text at this stage,

pulsing towards some unknown, impossible end - Sam's partner, Jim, says that the shares are 'going to be on the up and up for ever' (AV,201) - inevitably falls: share prices sank 'as if they were lined with lead' (AV,202). And the phallic connotations are unmistakable: 'a solid mass of property shrank on every side at once, and went on shrinking so that it seemed only a matter of time before its name would be no more than a noticeboard marked "danger" on the edge of an empty quarry' (AV,204). In a social frame which is controlled by a materialistically acquisitive and teleological impulse, dissatisfaction and disappointment become inevitable. Late in the narrative, Sam remarks that 'if the pace in the office was slowing down it was only because people knew that some day its affairs were bound to collapse and they would be out on the streets looking for jobs which would not be there' (AV,242). Sam's office has become a place of huge discontent where 'there was turned one more page of this monstrous book that his business had become' (AV,220). The authority of the fiction is burdensome, and the pages are relentlessly turned towards the book's conclusion (the (ir)resolution of a powerful and consuming story).

Sometimes, early in the morning, Sam had been filled with a sense of desolation, as he was struck by the inherent incongruities of his existence. The desolation is a symptom of the loss of faith, of belief or trust in the structure or authority which, to a great extent, directs or even controls society (controls the text). To maintain his equilibrium, Sam must dismiss his forebodings as 'an absurd delirium engendered by a sickness he meant to treat drastically' (191). The feminist reader must foster this 'delirium', (*de-lirium* - out of the

ridge, furrow) refuse 'treat'ment, if she is to read the texts (her world) productively.

The ironic narrative stance of both *Harriet Hume* and 'The Abiding Vision' motivates the reader to ask questions relevant to a reading of all West's narratives. How far are the stories organizations or fantasies of the dominant culture and at whose, or what expense? Can one disentangle the differences between meanings which satisfy female desire and those which merely (re)confirm a masculine fantasy of the feminine and its conflation with the female? How wide is the gap between what the stories say and what they show? Where are the female characters' stories in relation to the principal narrative lines? How far does the narrator's identification with her characters control the dominant narrative pattern, control the reader? In the textual expositions which follow, I pursue these lines of enquiry.

The Return of the Soldier

Rather than coming 'too close to being *merely* a woman's novel' (my italics) as Samuel Hynes worries it does - perish the thought - the narrative of *The Return of the Soldier* doesn't belong to women at all. I would agree with Hynes, however, that the text, West's first novel, published in 1918, is 'a small masterpiece'⁴⁰: it can be a piece for the master, depending on huge gaps, and the suppression of female desire (which would spoil the master's peace) for its coherence. The formalism forces a narrative retreat into idealism and spirituality, once social and economic, aesthetic and ideological bases of authority and

organisation have been exposed as highly dubious. Rebecca West had predicted as much (foretold her own amnesia?). In an article written in 1914, she forecast the direction which a war ravaged society is likely to take.

Disgust at the daily deathbed which is Europe has made us hunger for the kindly way of righteousness and we want to save our souls. And the immediate result of this desire will probably be a devastating reaction towards conservatism of thought and intellectual stagnation. Not unnaturally we shall scuttle for safety towards militarism and orthodoxy. Life will be lived as it might be in some white village among English elms; while the boys are drilling on the green we shall look up at the church spire and take it as proven that it is pointing to God with final accuracy."

The ironic challenge of her journalistic commentary here is absent in the fictional, recuperative narrative of *The Return of the Soldier*; perhaps that is even more reason why the text demands a productive re-reading.

The narrative is related in the first person. West's use of the limited point of view harnesses the technique of Henry James, on whom she had recently published her first text of criticism. Chris Baldry, a wealthy aristocrat, and a casualty of the 1914-1918 war, suffers amnesia due to the effects of shell shock. The gap in his memory causes him to forget his wife, Kitty, and to re-awaken his desire for Margaret, the poor,

working class lover of his youth. She represents the only meaningful reality for the amnesiac soldier. At his request she is brought to Baldry Court, and to a hostile reception from Kitty and Jenny. A poor, middle-aged woman of plain appearance, now also married, she nevertheless means as much to Chris as she did during their earlier courtship. (He had broken off their relationship because he didn't trust her friendship with another man, 'as he would trust a girl of his own class' (ROTS,107). He then left for Mexico, to manage the family mines, and 'to keep the mines going through the revolution in that country, to keep the firm's head above water and Baldry Court sleek and hospitable' (ROTS,110). (His letters to Margaret from there never reached her.) After a period during which Margaret and Chris's love is allowed to reassert itself, because of the latter's 'delusion' (ROTS,132), his memory is restored by Margaret who reminds him of the (now dead) young son whom he and Kitty shared. Margaret and her husband also suffered the death of their son around the same time as Chris and Kitty. Before she reluctantly but dutifully restores his memory, Margaret is seen to be arguing 'with the whole hostile reasonable world' (ROTS,178). Chris's memory recovered, he returns to the battleground 'looking every inch a soldier' (ROTS,188). Kitty diagnoses Chris's recovery as a cure; Jenny is dubious of the value of the compromise involved in the restoration of Chris's memory.

By making the story come full circle - the returned soldier returns - West exploits the trick of the imaginary, the rounded form which only thinly disguises the dissatisfaction which lingers. The unorthodox, indeed, almost novel, fictional treatment of the unconscious and

psychoanalysis, uncovers and recovers gaps but refuses to confront what constructs them and what maintains them.⁴² As a challenge to the dutiful conclusion of the novel, which reiterates that social respectability, war, extremes of wealth and poverty, class and gender divisions, and the divorce of public and private spheres, are the rationale of mature life, the unarticulated or obscured narrative performs an act of treachery on an (un)acceptable, fictional 'ending'.

Both the narrative structure and the activity of narration are collusive. Despite the explicit and increasing discomfort of the first person narrator with her conventional (bourgeois) frame (and isn't it also West's discomfort with a voice that struggles to suffocate /sacrifice any impulse to irony?), their narrative conspires in its refusal to see the connections between a masculinist hegemony and the brutal destruction of war. Jenny's romantic gush, which 'in the deep daze of devotion' idolises a 'harsh and diffident masculinity' (*ROTS*, 185), sanctions (if inadvertently) a 'No Man's Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead...' (*ROTS*, 187).⁴³

As early as 1913 Rebecca West, the journalist, offered a powerful critique of sentimental writing, dismantling the constructions of her own future fictional persona. 'The spinster, looking out on the world through the drawn curtains of the boarding school or the equally celibate boarding house sees men as trees walking - large, dignified, almost majestic. Like Helena, she refuses to see their pathetic defeats in the strife against circumstance and temperament. Perpetually she conceives them as masters of the situation'.⁴⁴

Jenny's sense of her own subjectivity is consciously silenced. Her discursive construction of Chris[t] resembles the resurrection of the phallic, the medium of her own and Kitty's absence. Her position is controlled by its insistent claiming of her sole purpose to satisfy masculine desire: 'nothing could ever really become part of our life until it had been referred to Chris's attention' (*ROTS*, 21). She struggles to make Chris's wants, desires and visions her own. The struggle is evident through her repeated self-deprecation and attempt at self-effacement. Jenny's suppression serves as a metaphor for other silences to which the horrific noise of war - 'a lost Zeppelin sometimes clanks like a skeleton across the sky above us' (*ROTS*, 55) - paradoxically draws attention.

While the state of amnesia unleashes desire, only Chris's wants can be (temporarily) satisfied. Jenny's narrative represents an unresolved conflict between the authority of duty and (an almost unthinkable) treachery, its apparent obverse: the first in the prominent ideology of the narrative - the foregrounding of masculine desire and Jenny's 'duty' to Chris, the second in its omissions and obscurities, where the reader resists the (di)visions offered by Jenny.

Her quasi-religious revisioning of Margaret and Chris's past, as well as the representation of their present relationship from her perspective are nostalgic constructions of an illusorily complete idyll which strives to compensate for a present of chaos and destruction. Margaret is eventually valued by Jenny for the pleasure she affords Chris; her visible impecunity (she was 'repulsively furred with neglect and

poverty' (*ROTS*,25)) becoming immaterial.⁴⁵ In her earnestness 'to derive the real story' (*ROTS*,79) from Chris about his relationship with Margaret, she displaces her desire for him into vicarious pleasure of their idealised union. The primary contentment enjoyed by the union of mother and child is revisioned in Margaret's and Chris's last embrace and observed by Jenny who saw 'a figure mothering something in her arms' (*ROTS*,186), with connotations of the female lover legitimised as mother.

For Jenny, Margaret has reached the pinnacle of women's achievement.

It means that the woman has gathered the soul of the man into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quiet for a little time. That is a great thing for a woman to do. I know there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships, but independence is not the occupation of most of us. What we desire is greatness such as this which has given sleep to the beloved. (*ROTS*,144).

Rebecca West here joins the 'most of us', the opposition to 'independent spirits', and where does that leave her with Jenny? Evaluating herself within such a framework where she is neither an 'independent spirit', nor one of a couple, she lacks definition and purpose. At one point Jenny appears gratified by Chris's own attitude to her self-abnegation, for 'he paid [her] the highest compliment of disregard' (*ROTS*,68). Yet her physical desire for Chris is barely suppressed through the

narrative, and she acknowledges her feelings for him as 'frenzied' (ROTS,182), and her feelings of physical jealousy 'as ugly and unmental as sickness' (ROTS,132). Jenny writes up a chain of being where Chris and Margaret are seated on high, and Kitty, 'the broken doll' (ROTS,125), lies at their feet. The narrator herself also 'did not matter' (ROTS,151). As Jenny loses her faith in Kitty - 'a faceless figure with flounces' - she transfers her trust to Chris and Margaret, the 'only two real people in the world ... and I was absorbed in a mental image of them' (ROTS,96). (Responsibility for Chris's unhappiness is implicitly burdened on Kitty, the scapegoat, so that the reason for the split between Margaret and Chris many years before is overshadowed.) Creating in her mind's eye an image of the couple and comparing them to biblical engravings of saints and prophets, Jenny goes on to describe them, 'standing, in flowing white robes, on rocks against a pitch black sky, a strong light beating on their eyes upturned in ecstasy, and their hands outstretched to receive the spiritual blessing of which the fierce rays were an emanation' (ROTS,96-97).

In an effort to dissolve problematic personal, social and economic relations to the immaterial, gross discrepancies are, paradoxically, starkly highlighted. Chris, and then Margaret are thought 'out' of the story: serving to block exposure or consideration of the issues of war, class, and relations between men and women. This retreat or return cannot effect a closure, however, when apparent salvation from one story is simultaneously a sacrifice to it.

The Judge

Ellen remembers her father as having been 'indeed a specialist in disappointment' (J, 193): a man who tantalised his wife and daughter with the carrot of expectant pleasure, only to frustrate the possibility of their enjoyment of it. The narrative represents the tension between contestant authorities: the father's text, whose plot represents the promise of (phallic/carrot) fulfilment, the mother/daughter's text whose story has traditionally been taken in (taken out) by his, and yet whose potential resists a future story which also belongs to him.⁴⁶

The epigraph which heads *The Judge*: 'every mother is a judge who sentences the children for the sins of the father', predicts a deterministic structure for the narrative form, predicates its linear structure, and sentences Ellen to her part in the girl's own Oedipal story: her motherhood is her destiny.⁴⁷ Yet resounding with the notes of a fatalistic dirge characteristic of the narrative's predominant mood, the inscription does not take account of the strength of protest and rebellion against a patriarchal history and a contemporary culture which constitute that authoritative pattern. For West (writing the novel around 1920) this was a time for pitting her feminism against her heavily compromised relationship with Wells, as well as trying to resolve the conflict between her public visibility as an author and critic, a model of feminist independence with her marginalization in her role as unmarried mother and mistress.

The third person narrative voice in the text is filtered through three principal character perspectives, each with a story to tell. The (self-

conscious) women's stories are largely dominated or heavily influenced by *histories*, however, and therefore dramatise a struggle to transgress a traditional pattern from within the parameters of patriarchy.

The narrative opens in Edinburgh, 1908, where Ellen Melville, a young, fiery and enthusiastic Suffragette, lives with her mother, a widow, in a poor district of the city.⁴⁸ She meets and falls in love with an Englishman, Richard Yaverland. As part of Ellen loves Richard for his aura of mysterious exoticism and experience, so Richard is attracted and amused by Ellen's combination of the romantic and practically brisk in her approach to life. The ecstasy of their love is short-lived, however. The figure of Richard's mother is increasingly foregrounded through Richard's musings, and presented when Ellen goes down to Essex to meet her after the death of her own mother. Marion Yaverland's powerful love for Richard, her illegitimate son, and his reciprocal adoration of her, means that any other relationship either tries to form is inevitably impoverished. Marion lavishes on Richard the love which the squire, his father, denied both of them. Even Roger, Marion's second son, born as a result of rape by Peacey, the squire's butler (who had, ironically, persuaded Marion to marry him in order to protect her own and Richard's respectability) is cast as an outsider to the incestuous bond. Marion realises that the tie between Richard and herself is destructively overwhelming, being a substitute for two other relationships whose miserable ends persistently torment her memory. She was snubbed by the squire whom she loved passionately, and sexually abused by Peacey, whom she trusted. Marion decides that only by her death will Richard be free to marry Ellen, so she commits suicide. In a heated confrontation

between Richard and Roger which follows knowledge of Marion's death, the former drives a knife into his half-brother's heart. Aware that Richard will shortly be arrested for murder, Ellen is nevertheless compelled by the demands of her body and the strength of her love for Richard, to conceive with him the child who will, it is suggested, ensure the story's re-enactment.

The text is a palimpsest of both dream and recurrent nightmare. Ellen's early aspirations, Marion's youthful optimism, and Richard's adolescent ambitions, constitute the dream, a break from history's pattern, and signify a desire which the (defeatist) narrative (*history*) cannot still. On the novel's closing page, Ellen muses on the knowledge that 'in throwing in her lot with [Richard and Marion] and with the human race which is perpetually defeated, she was nevertheless choosing the side of victory' (J,430). The nightmare is that 'monstrous' (J,193) story, which Richard's and Ellen's respective mothers were sacrificed to and which, by implication, is a legacy to Ellen's and Richard's own. Ultimately, the escape from history is made to seem a quasi-impossible dream. At one stage Marion is referred to as pretending to be 'some happy mother without a history' (J,321). The vague generality suggests the improbability and recalls Eliot's words in *The Mill on the Floss*, when she comments that 'the happiest mothers, like the happiest nations, have no history'.⁴⁹ For women, happiness and history have been incongruous dualities.

On the night when Marion finally disappears, Ellen awakes from a drowsy half-sleep and cries out, asking whether 'we will have to spend every

night searching for your mother, Richard?' (J,417). The father (actual and figurative) has failed to fulfil desire; a mother, unfettered by the father's law is, as yet, unrealised. When Richard and Ellen are returning to the house having failed to find Marion, the idea of an alternative is suggested: Richard 'slipped [Ellen's] arm through his to make her come. She stumbled along, turning her face aside towards those mystic woods. At the end of those paths was another clearing, wide but smaller than this, and girdled on all sides by the forest; and there was something there. ... Another temple? A statue? An event? She did not know. But if they found it, they would be happy forever. ...' (J,410). Another (in)visible happy-ever-after is fleetingly glimpsed before Ellen is unwillingly compelled to continue along the path.

At first, the discourse does claim the cause of women's suffrage as being a necessary and valuable movement towards the forging of new structures for women's lives. Yet the historical and social context foregrounded in the early stages of the narrative - dramatising Ellen's part as a young suffragette in Edinburgh - falls into relative obscurity as the story unfolds, suggesting that social and political institutions, public convention, have little relevance to personal relationships. The narrative resorts to biological determinism in an effort to justify and 'explain' itself. 'Nature' and an impersonal 'fate' are attributed increasingly large proportions and responsibility for events. But the narrative shows that responsibility does lie rather with a complex relation between personal, social, economic and cultural forces which have a direct bearing on the course of events. Marion, for example, is said at one point to have been modelled out of the clay of the marshes .

Yet we are also treated to a disturbing account of the personal misery and humiliation she undergoes, experiences of frustrated love, rape, and ostracism from the community, which together mould the older Marion into a subject of 'heavy impassivity' (J,232). Similarly, Ellen's final decision is to submit to Richard: 'This quietness was the safer way. She would wait patiently until he came to make his exorbitant demand' (J,430). Is the silence not simply a passive conformity, an agreement to being sold out, but also, and more importantly, as in 'The Abiding Vision', a statement of the woman's despair of continuing the story productively on its (conventional) terms? Will the birth of a child open the avenues for different stories? The quietness provides the means through which the text is continued productively by the reader.

Sunflower

Perhaps those of West's narratives where 'quietness' offers no solution, however much 'safer', are the most closely autobiographical of her texts. And both *Sunflower* and *Cousin Rosamund: A Saga of the Century* are, perhaps for that reason, those which remained unfinished at the time of her death. Their open-endedness can be read as representing the reluctance / refusal to closure (of the book, text, life), to death, to inevitable disappointment(?) Or perhaps because of their autobiographical import, there was always the (deferred) possibility that West's life would be able to satisfactorily shape the fiction.

In the case of *Sunflower*, the manuscript remained incomplete probably for a variety of reasons. Most obvious is the fact that its barely

disguised references to people still living at the time (notably Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook) would no doubt have caused West a great deal of public and personal trouble had the novel been published. On a fictional level, the narrative, as Victoria Glendinning remarks, is abandoned 'without reaching either climax or anti-climax, which gives it a peculiar tension. She abandoned it when the narrative demanded a major sexual confrontation between Sunflower and Pitt [West and Beaverbrook] - and this, since it involved problems that she had not solved, may have been more than she could cope with, even fictionally'.⁵⁰ West's relationship with Beaverbrook was similarly left in (for West, an embarrassing) limbo. After a brief affair culminating in New York during the Christmas of 1923 where they found themselves to be sexually incompatible, the couple maintained no regular contact. During a meeting with Beaverbrook for lunch the following year, West was shaken by her own inference that Beaverbrook had never been serious about his relationship with her. Her realisation led her to believe that there was 'something repellant about her as a woman that made men impotent'.⁵¹

A striking (thematic) similarity and strong (tonal) contrast, which influence their respective structures and impulses, is to be read between the texts of *Sunflower* and its (chronological) successor *Harriet Hume*. Since West never completed the former, why should she choose to remodel it, back to front as it were, in the form of capricious play for the latter? Do the humour and irony of *Harriet Hume* map the distance between text and author which *Sunflower* finds too painfully close? The later text mocks its own self assured teleology of proposed self-enclosure through its deconstructive conclusion of 'A Very Happy

Eternity' (HH,288). *Sunflower* makes no joke of its open-endedness. Both texts, however, refuse the narrative determinism of *The Return of the Soldier* and *The Judge*.

The character of Sunflower represents what West felt herself bound to be: a public performer, an actress, whose private life constituted a painful conflict with that confident and self-assured performance. The narrative centres on a period of emotional and psychological crisis in the life of the title character, Sunflower, who has gained her reputation as an actress through her beauty rather than through the quality of her performance. Although born and raised in a working-class environment, Sunflower now finds herself most often in the company of prominent public figures, notably politicians. The narrative traces the demise of Sunflower's ten-year relationship with Essington [Wells], a former Liberal politician, confident, controlled and dignified in the public eye; belligerent, cruel, embittered and insecure as a private individual, and sadistic in his treatment of Sunflower. As her relations with Essington deteriorate, Sunflower's infatuation with Francis Pitt [Beaverbrook], an Australian millionaire turned politician and friend of Essington's, develops into a passionate love affair experienced more through her imagination than through external action, as a striving for satisfaction. Sunflower's unconvincing attempts at self-consolation for her part in the (frustrating) narrative - 'Since everything was really all right, and she was of course quite happy' (S,22); and 'she had no troubles, really' (S,60) - vacillate with her distancing herself from the life story in which she is involved, by the creation of an alternative place and repeated short story in the mind, where she can

realise the pleasurable desires she has for Francis Pitt. Sunflower's relationship with Essington reaches its nadir, and the relationship ends on the evening that he strikes her, enacting the 'moment she had feared for years' (S,233). It is a moment which was rehearsed earlier in the text, only without the actions being fully executed, although 'she knew, as certainly as she knew that she would eventually die, that he would some day strike her' (S,43). The story trails off just as Sunflower and Francis Pitt's relationship is developing, and Sunflower is feeling a 'happiness which is foursquare to the elements' (S,265).

The text is narrated in the third person, the narrative voice being closely aligned to that of the character of Sunflower. At the time of writing the *Sunflower* text, West was undergoing psychoanalysis and was making notes of her dreams and of her analysis at the back of her *Sunflower* manuscript book. The two scripts cannot be unconnected. The text interweaves a traditional familiar 'woman's' love story with a struggle for the articulation of subjective female desire, of imaginative pleasure. For the narrator, her character seems to be a means of expressing a desire for a route back to a woman who, in part, precedes, or by-passes logocentrism. Indeed, it is as though the narrator who 'speaks' and constructs the text is, through her character, seeking to distinguish subjective desire from the desire of the other. Yet she also appears to be striving to match the needs she is assumed to claim (within conventional fictional parameters) with her own desires which differ from those (others' desires; fictional limits). Thus the narrator dons the mask of Sunflower, throws it off, testing out a range of positions: critically, sympathetically, empathetically, looking by

turns for security, freedom, innovation, convention and pleasure. Of course, what the narrator / the text want, cannot be separated from what they have. Narrator and character perspective become indistinguishable when the imaginative adventures, pictures, memories and prophecies of Sunflower are realised. The foregrounded (contemporary) political discussions between Pitt and Essington in relation to the recovery of the Liberal Party (and to which the narrator devotes some considerable detail) remain abstracted from Sunflower's personal concerns.

The close link which does exist between narrator and character is particularly interesting since the latter repeatedly (obsessively) refers to herself (and is regarded by many of those around her) as 'stupid' (a sister to Harriet's 'dear fool'). A dictionary definition of the adjective describes it as meaning lacking in *common* sense, perception or *normal* intelligence. Sunflower's perspective may be regarded as a vision whose effect is to destandardise, destabilise the so-called 'common', the 'normal', the publicly acceptable and conventional view of the world, while remaining, at least in part, 'affected and influenced by its codes and values. In a teleological narrative the project is to 'get' or 'possess' something that one hasn't got. Conversely, 'stupid' people like Sunflower want what they can't have. This desire is figured through the sensuousness and physicality of the imagery. (The blurring of boundaries between objects in this narrative contrasts with the effort at clean lines, curves and globes: the struggle for symmetry which delimits the images in *The Return of the Soldier* text). Sunflower's fantasies are involved with a subjective sensuousness, imagination involved with the body: 'it was as if she were

holding a berry in her mouth and waiting for a signal to crush it between her tongue and teeth and flood her palate with the flavour that she wanted (S,150). The withholding of the (impossible/imaginary) experience also expresses the control of excess and quasi-violent richness ('crush', 'flood'). Against these fantasied places, the 'real' world becomes relativised as 'a vast desert' (S,8), and associated with the terms 'bankruptcy' and starvation' (S,49). The bulky, obstructive nature of public and social life is thus transformed into an emptiness, a representation of lack itself, which nevertheless looms all the larger and more powerful for that.

The narrator and Sunflower do, nevertheless, appear to struggle at several points. For example, where the latter is shown to read herself as others read her, to accept their judgement of her as 'stupid'. In such submissiveness she becomes the puppet actress who is painfully self-alienated and powerless to direct her destiny (direct the narrative). As a sometimes greedy consumer of fiction, the character of Sunflower wouldn't have been able to resist a conventional happy-ever-after closure to the text. She sympathises with the working class people who 'bent their noses over the cheap prints and tracked down arguments for the reality of their romantic dreams among the trivial, smudgy words ...' (S,20). Their desire for escape is from financial poverty, hers from a poverty of love.

Cousin Rosamund: A Saga of the Century

As for the religious field, I remeber so well that autumn afternoon when my father came into the garden down the steps from the french window, and found me busy at a flowerbed which I had cleared from the yellow hands of leaves cast by the chestnut trees.

'What are you you digging up?' he asked in alarm. (Not that he knew anything about gardening, beyond a curiously detailed knowledge of fuschias which had grown profusely at his home in County Kerry).

'I'm digging up conkers', I said.

'I doubt if there'll be any conkers in that flowerbed', he objected.

'Lettie and Winnie have been clearing them off each morning because of the spring flowers. Are you sure you're not digging up bulbs?'

'I'm sure they're conkers,' I told him. 'I buried them myself.'

'Why did you do that?'

'I am God,' I explained, 'and they are people and I made them die, and now I am resurrecting them.'

'Oh, you are, are you?' said my father, and sat down on the iron steps and watched me, drawing on his pipe. Presently he asked, 'But why did you make the people die if you meant to dig them up again? Why didn't you just leave them alone?'

To that I replied, 'Well, that would have been alright for them. But it would have been no fun for me.'⁵²

The above passage, taken from West's (uncompleted) memoirs, *Family Memories* can be read as a metaphor for the narrator's project in the *Saga*. Assuming responsibility for / authority over the others, the 'I' has 'fun', pleasure, in the satisfaction of retrieval, and in the attempt to save herself as a coherent subject. The father's daughter has 'blown the whole [hole] gaff', learned how to play the game. The first person narrator of *Cousin Rosamund: A Saga of the Century* apparently wields total control over the narrative she relates. This is the only one of West's narratives which foregrounds and traces the development of a female character following a professional career, rather than being the woman behind the great man, which is the 'place' Harriet, another professional pianist, and other principal female characters take.

West worked on the text writing and re-writing over a span of almost thirty years. It was begun in the nineteen forties, as a novel of treachery (the narrative which was later to become *The Birds Fall Down*); *The Fountain Overflows* was published in 1956. The *Saga* was planned to consist of three or four volumes. Some months after the publication of the first novel, West was preparing the fair copy of its sequel. But the manuscripts were never submitted; West continued to rework the narrative, but chose not to hand it over to the publishers. The unpublished typescript was posthumously published as *This Real Night* in 1984. The remaining typescript, constituting around two thirds of what

is now *Cousin Rosamund*, was published together with material from manuscript notebooks in 1985.

The insecurities of West's own childhood and family life are confused into the fabric of the Aubrey text; they are transmuted into a powerful expression of a kind of faith which approaches religious belief. Christa Wolf's comment in *A Model Childhood* that 'the richness of childhood everyone feels may only be the result of the constant rethinking we devote to it',⁵³ seems particularly apposite in West's case. The text's narration as a retrospective account, from a point where time is apparently still (Rose comments of her early childhood at the start of *The Fountain Overflows* that 'all this happened more than fifty years ago', (FO,2)), whose diachrony thereby carries an authoritative tone, is presumably to be seen as more reliable, in comparison to such a 'cloudy theme as the future where nobody can say if the author is right or wrong' (FO,314). Of course, for the author, the writing and re-writing are prospective activities. Before writing it, West drew up a detailed synopsis of the *Saga* which more closely resembles the written, the completed state impossible to the narrative as process.⁵⁴ The synopsis is the expressive challenge to excess which is the contradiction of coherence. In other words, the *Saga* may be read as a process of writing out - stating and erasing - the insecurities of subjectivity as it is bound up with and produced by the family: a literal and symbolic structure in (textual) culture.

The Fountain Overflows, the first novel of the trilogy, deals with Rose's early childhood, mostly spent in London, with her parents, Clare

and Piers Aubrey, her twin sister, Mary, another sister Cordelia, and the youngest, her only brother, Richard Quin. The narrative deals with the conflict-ridden relationship between Rose's parents, and particularly with her father's erratic behaviour and financial recklessness, which means that the family live in an atmosphere of insecurity. This feeling is balanced by the love and closeness which the family share, and the richness of their imaginative lives, fuelled by literature and music. The exception to this feeling of solidarity is Cordelia, who is presented as the outsider, dissatisfied with her family predicament, and therefore the target of Rose's (narrative) unrelenting resentment through the *Saga*. The narrative traces the burgeoning of Mary and Rose's pianistic talent, under their mother's tuition, and Cordelia's doomed attempts to become an accomplished violinist. The Aubreys become very close to Constance, the wife of Clare's cousin, Jock. He is a flautist, but a musician whose art is destructive rather than creative, and a man who treats his wife and daughter, Rosamund, cruelly. Mary and Rose come to idolise Rosamund, in the same way that they adore (and Rose idealises) their young brother, Richard Quin. Another family friend is Mr Morpurgo, a wealthy Jew, who becomes an important source of support and comfort to the Aubreys. Through the narrative Piers Aubrey becomes increasingly withdrawn and finally leaves home, and the family apparently penniless. However Clare tells the children that they will not be destitute since family portraits which hang in the girls' bedrooms are not copies as she had led them to believe, but originals, which will fetch a high price. Mary and Rose start to take lessons from a well-known teacher in London, in preparation for entrance for a musical scholarship. Cordelia's violin

career comes to an abrupt end when she is told by a famous teacher of the instrument that she is a bad player. She makes a suicide attempt but survives. Mary and Rose are successful in their scholarship attempts and the first narrative ends with their first professional performance.

In *This Real Night* Mary and Rose's careers as pianists take off and both become famous on the concert circuit. Much detail is offered of the social scenarios into which their work brings them, scenarios populated by the wealthy and famous, a decadent and fragile world. Cordelia gets married and Rosamund becomes a nurse. With the outbreak of war, Richard Quinn becomes an officer, and is killed in action in France. Clare Aubrey, who has cancer, dies soon afterwards.

Cousin Rosamund sees Rosamund making what appears to Rose and Mary be a disastrous marriage to a wealthy Greek financier. Rose and Mary's lives are busy with concert tours, though for much of the narrative Rose is in a state of near breakdown - reluctant to make contact with people outside her immediate family and close network of family friends, and feeling a strong sense of self-revulsion. Eventually, however, she falls in love with a long-time colleague, Oliver, a composer, and marries him, continuing her work as a performer. Here the narrative breaks off, just before the infamous Wall Street crash of 1929.

The first person narrator, Rose Aubrey, writes the text, we are told, although her professional talent is music. Unlike Harriet Hume she is presented as the (restless) subject of her art, rather than emerging as its reflection. Shortly before his disappearance, Rose's father 'at last

set himself the task of writing a book: not just a pamphlet but a full-length book' (FO,290). Before long this project is abandoned. Rose persists where her father lost himself to pessimistic despair. Taking on the responsibility of authorship through the 'I' formulation, she fictionalises her father ('he's absent-minded because he's a great author' (FO,22)) and herself as her father, so that she strives to present herself as a cohesive subject, his substitute. When she and Mary turn professional musicians, it is Rose who retains the patronymic, while Mary changes her surname (to Keith). Rose also takes after her mother, however, extending the latter's role, and making public what her mother was confined to do only privately: perform as a professional pianist.

While writing and language are perceived as secondary to the art of music, the narrator's desire is to forge, through imaginative retrospection (where forgetting and re-membering both play their part), a combination comparable to musical harmony. The alternating contradictions of 'seren[ity]' and 'terror', which are regarded by Rose as constituting music (TRN,210), are, to an extent, reflected in the working of the textual narrative: serenity is formulated in the vision of pattern as uni-form, while terror surrounds the speaking subject's insecurities, especially when the hypotheses are shattered by experience.

The tracing through the linear narrative of the subject's history is simultaneously the reproduction of family lineage where apparent stability and order are composed through continuity and the narrator's

belief in the potentially complete story: inconsistencies are covered over by that sense of sequence. The family is diachronic by its very definition: to say family is to say narrative and genre. This text, in contrast to the *Sunflower* narrative, breaks off shortly after the point where Rose has experienced sexual fulfilment. Rosalind Coward remarks on how the history of the novel as confessional form highlights 'sexual events as significant time'.⁵⁵ Indeed, in *Cousin Rosamund*, Rose comments confidently: 'the pattern of our lives was determined, we had only to work out the other half and make it symmetrical' (CR,273).

Through the 'imaginative system' (TRN,169) which Rose explains as characteristic of the Aubrey family, the romantic imaginary (the literally untrue which is also visionary and inventive), the narrator claims a totality of vision. Since *Cousin Rosamund* remains unfinished and its proposed sequel unwritten, the story is incompletely executed: as a diachronic narrative, it is thus partly performed and prematurely aborted. Its linear life and death may also be read as symptoms of the 'completed' texts as they exist in published form and as they reflect the author's obsessive fidelity to the schematised synopsis. A grand plan is envisaged where the power of the spirit redeems a world that even art cannot salvage, in an attempt to pattern a unifying, coherent and meaningful vision, and in defence against her perception of society in disintegration. And yet, this vision ultimately stands outside a linear notion of time which is seen as a dynamic feature of loss: 'time, I saw, was the fault of the universe, and because of it grief and expectation, equally mischievous, would prevent us having peace to watch the present' (CR,47). Significantly too, the family *Saga* is named after a

relative *outside* the immediate familial relation. Rosamund 'was different, really different' (CR,35). This figure is gorged with indulgent richness, countering the laws of prohibitive control, like the spoon of honey and cream she feeds on in *This Real Night*. The pleasure of gluttony is indulged for the 'I' and her author as they strive to cram the spaces. In the synopsis, West wrote that 'Rosamund was all [Mary and Rose's] art could not give them - she was, in fact, religion'. And in the narrative, 'she found whatever we had for the moment lost' (CR,27). Yet Rosamund's faithful are frustrated in their devotion when by her marriage, she becomes alienated from the family group. Rose remarks that 'I had reason to doubt whether the Rosamund I had thought I knew had ever existed' (CR,103). 'Stupid', like Sunflower, that is to say not common-place, and a character about whom 'everything ... was contradictory' (FO,364), Rosamund both contains and overflows with the discontents of her narrator.

The Birds Fall Down

The writing of *The Birds Fall Down* is interwoven with that of the *Saga* - themes are echoed and modified. Familial treachery (the (F)father's desertion) is duplicated both in the political and personal deceptions with which the text concerns itself. The narrative which probes the notions of political and religious loyalty and treachery within a nationalist imperialist system of class struggle and opposition, simultaneously raises questions about (sexual) fidelity in the unequal relationship between men and women, and the necessity for (dis)trust which is a component feature if all those connections. Adultery - ad

alter - the movement towards another, away from the one, the same (the state as social, political and religious unit; marital harmony) is finally exposed and admitted. Such a development also reinforces the notions of necessary textual adultery: the dissemination of one meaning into several.

West began writing *The Birds Fall Down* during the years in which she was involved in writing and reporting on the subjects of treason as a journalist. In her biography of West, Glendinning remarks that West 'had her treason novel all planned out in the 1940s, plus a sequel. But the sequel took on a life of its own, or rather of her own, and turned finally into *The Fountain Overflows*. When she had difficulties with the planned sequels of *The Fountain Overflows* she turned back, twenty years on, to her abandoned novel about treachery'.⁵⁶ *The Birds Fall Down* was published in 1966. Its mood and themes closely parallel those of Joseph Conrad's text of 1911, *Under Western Eyes*.

The narrative bases itself on an actual historical event, to which West draws attention in her Foreword to the text. It centres on a conversation which took place on a moving train in 1909 between Berlin and Cologne.⁵⁷ The author sets her fictionalised (re-written) journey almost ten years earlier in Northern France. The sheer length of the conversation as produced by West is a virtuoso performance of telling, displaying the authority of narrative itself. The historical conversation revealed that Ievno Aseff, head of the Battle Organisation, which was the terrorist wing of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, was also a tsarist police agent.⁵⁸ The exposure of his treachery filled the

revolutionaries with scepticism and cleared the way for the other major revolutionary party, the Bolshevik wing of the Social Democrats, whose leader was Lenin. His rising influence led to the revolution of 1917.

Also in the Foreword, West refers to her faith in having produced a definitive narrative or, as she puts it, 'a true story'. But the text is 'founded' (built) on a (forever absent) conversation - which was transcribed by the participants into 'their recorded sayings and their writings', on which West says she has 'drawn heavily'. In so doing, she has, once more, re-written them. Like the moving train on which the conversation took place, then, the words cannot ever be stilled, cannot mirror the (impossible) 'true story', the original (nonde)script. Every word, however authentic, is a *productive* betrayal by the writer, by the reader.⁵⁹

The novel opens in London, the home of Tania and Edward Rowan, MP, and their daughter Laura. Tania informs her husband of her plan to visit her ageing Russian parents, Count and Countess Nikolai and Sofia Diakonov, in Paris. Exiled by the Tsar, Nicholas II, on a false and unproven charge of treachery, Nikolai nevertheless remains loyal to the spirit of tsarism and submissive to his leader's commands. Laura is relieved to be accompanying her mother to France since it is clear that the relationship between her parents is troubled. (Through the narrative it is revealed that her father is having an affair with Susie Staunton.) Laura and Tania find the Russians living in the faded splendour of past glory in the Avenue Kleber in Paris. It is decided that Laura will accompany her grandfather to the resort of Mures sur Mer for a few days

while her grandmother undergoes hospital treatment. Kamensky, Nikolai's trusted secretary, is at the last moment prevented from travelling with them since he apparently catches his hand in the carriage door as they are leaving for the station, and must go to have it treated. As the train leaves Paris, a middle-aged man enters the carriage in which Laura and Nikolai are settled. He is recognized by the latter as Vassili Chubinov, son of a former lawyer friend. Chubinov is a member of the Socialist Revolutionary group, and is therefore disdained by Nikolai as a traitor to his class, the minor nobility. During the course of the journey, Chubinov reveals that Kamensky, whom the Count values for his constant loyalty, is also leader of the revolutionaries. (Kamensky had faked injury to his hand to enable him to attend a meeting crucial to his own security as a double agent). Nikolai suffers a stroke at the shock of this news and has to leave the train at a town called Grissaint. Chubinov tells Laura of his plan to return to Paris to kill Kamensky, in order to purge the cause of its traitor and to protect Laura and her family from the menace of espionage. That evening Nikolai, with Laura at his bedside, dies in Grissaint. Eventually, Laura, her father (who has arrived from England) and Kamensky (who had travelled down to Grissaint from Paris) return to the capital with Nikolai's body. Later, in Paris, assisted by information received from Laura, Chubinov shoots and kills Kamensky as the latter is making his way to the Diakonov household. Laura, unbeknown to Chubinov, hides the gun, his murder weapon in her grandfather's coffin, and then assists him in his bluffing his way through police questioning about the incident. Chubinov then escapes to England. Tania tells Laura of her plan that they should

emigrate to Russia together, since she is optimistic about that country's future.

The Hegelian pattern of thesis and antithesis (pertinent to a narrative preoccupied with developments leading to the Russian revolution of 1917) is parodied through the contrastive positioning of different (male) perspectives and their conflicting ideologies. Instead of an ultimate *Aufhebung*, however, the end crashes quietly down into bathos.⁶⁰ The synthesis, the placing and location of a resting place is a wry joke of an ending: by murdering the character claiming to personify philosophical synthesis (the purity only possessed by death - white roses obscure Kamensky's face); by claiming to *know* the future: Tania's optimistic prophecy of the 'happy, happy age' (*BFD*, 428) to come.

The text of *The Birds Fall Down* abandons even superficial duty to the paternal. While its discourse mimics and traces a plot directed schema, its thrusting monological impulse is subverted by pluralising effects: irony, doubles entendres, other stories, ambivalence, contradictory perspectives, the relativising of public and private.⁶¹ The text rewrites a (pre)History, getting words in edgeways before the universally notorious event of the Russian revolution of 1917, so that the illusory monolithic line of the narrative, of a single political discourse, is confused. Through the introduction of the traditionally marginalised (here prioritised) female subject(s) into a famously male history, the feminine is reinscribed in the reworking of historical process. Through synchronic diversion, by introducing other stories apart from and intertwined with the big story, stories that haunt - literally bring

home, with their connections to West's family saga - the political narrative from outside this particular text, the apparent inevitability of historic movement is disrupted. Thus the text dislocates time, shifts both space and perspective, (the novel is set at the start of the twentieth century, mostly in northern France; the historical events on which it is based took place in Germany in 1909), in order to focus on the complex of events which give rise to change, rather than on the moment of revolution.

A scornful cynic with regards to destructive and exclusive patterns of male revolutionary history, Laura (comparable to the character of Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*), with whose perspective the narrator is generally closely aligned, reveals the separation between her mother and herself in her open disdain of conventional systems.⁶² (Laura's 'knowing' position as ironist is, however, undercut by her own sexual innocence, which the narrator and the reader 'know', not as clarity, but as an added complication to textual meanings.) 'Teleology, oolitic, proportional representation, symbiotic, what they stood for was part of the world, and might once have been bright like the world, but the dust which falls wherever there are males had buried them in its dingy drifts. (BFD, p.301).

The myth of the antiseptic idea or sterilised, immunised ideology is collapsed through the text as it throws up a complex of meanings. In a text where 'each man [woman?] is a mystery to himself', where points of view clash, and where even the narrator's voice, despite its privileging of Laura's perspective, shows scattered allegiance to the other voices,

interpretations are inevitably doubtful and uncertain. In a radio interview, West stated that 'the novel in which I hear my own voice most clearly was *The Birds Fall Down*'.⁶² The voice dispersed into voices finds authenticity, a home, in different homes. Yet since every position is realised (by the dominant view, Laura's) as necessarily corrupt, the perception of all political activity perceived as futile (compare Harriet's apparent faith in Arnold's motives for political activity), both the tone of ironic absurdity and the state of death occasionally become themselves the means for her towards (non)meaning. Laura muses at one point that 'surely one learned the truth about everything as soon as one died' (BFD, 380). Indeed, *Harriet Hume* could only stage a teleological unity in death. The pointlessness which terrifies and attracts Laura highlights the trap of teleology. In the text the activity of revolution becomes silently expressed through the discourse as both a cause and an effect of that pointlessness. At the Gard du Nord in Paris, she senses 'an atmosphere of threatening and causeless rancour, as of a revolution without an object' (BFD, 80). Shouldn't we have, rather, terror of revolution with a *final* object, when that object is perceived as an *end*? Is revolution (political, social, sexual, textual) not only a necessary but also a continuing conversion of objects into subjects, and goals into processes?

In a text which suggests an empty centre, the reader's eyes scan the multi-faceted surface where there is plenty to distract the attention, without any of it offering final security. Thus, for example, the personal sincerity with which Count Nikolai records the virtues of the tsar in his diary, is used as evidence of the leader's vice by Chubinov

and the revolutionaries. The tears which Chubinov cries when being questioned at the end about Kamensky's murder, are both genuine and deceitful: he simultaneously grieves for his former comrade and fears discovery of his own murderous action. Laura becomes adept at irony as her own sensitivity to equivocation develops, so that she can feign sympathy for the duplicitous Kamensky, remarking: 'Your grieving heart is like your bandaged hand' (BFD,291). Laura is 'revolted' by the 'spurious bandage' (BFD,310) Kamensky wears, disguising as it does the brutal weapon as victim of an accident. Eyes might imagine ideal visions, but at closer range strain to distinguish between baffling contradictions, and the one minor character who is cast as an innocent (and potential victim of treachery) is blind. The confusion of the combined perspectives wallow in the recurrently imaged chaos of water and mud in which the Russians are 'embedded' (BFD,202), according to Chubinov, while the shadows in the Diakonov household 'seemed a kind of dust' (BFD,331). And the analogy drawn between Susie Staunton's murmurings and a 'cooing dove' (BFD,264); together they signify the disreputability of seeming innocence.

Doubles entendres and the device of dramatic irony are played on the reader as well as within the narrative: the first reading in which the reader's innocence with respect to the articulated 'facts' of the narrative is exploited, is 'corrupted' by second and subsequent readings, 'knowledge' is extended and complicated. Such effects not only intensify the visions but heighten their dramatic tension. Early in the novel Kamensky reaffirms his loyalty to Count Nikolai, assuring the latter that he 'could not be here if there were not a conspiracy against

you' (BFD,49). And in the concluding chapter, Laura intensifies the pitch of dramatic irony by revealing a simultaneous truth and untruth about herself. She and Chubinov are discussing the unknown woman whom, according to his diary, Kamensky planned to marry. 'What sort of a woman would Kamensky love?' she asks. 'Only a woman like himself, capable of treachery and murder' (BFD,421). She thus links herself with the character she abhors but to whom she does bear relation - since she was unavoidably party to crime. She cannot know herself. This point bears out the impossibility of making boldly definitive and final value judgements. And of not making them, however (necessarily) temporarily or provisionally.

Tania's (revolutionary) determination finally to leave her husband and return to Russia, with her prediction of 'a happy, happy age' to come (BFD,428) is a way to conclude the text, presage a new history. The irony of the naive conclusion again draws attention to the fact that the only possible ending is an impossible ending. The *Saga* trilogy, whose synopsis organises a conclusion in which the characters of Richard Quinn and Rosamund perform redemptive acts to combat local and universal evil, is similarly impossible to complete when transposed to the process of narrative.

The Thinking Reed

Isabelle Tarry in *The Thinking Reed*, by contrast, admits the confusion. On the narrative's closing page she says to her husband, Marc: 'well, there

are many things in life that seem to be contradictions, and we will be able to reconcile them only when we know more'. And then two more silent thoughts follow. 'It struck her that the difference between men and women is the rock on which civilisation will split before it can reach any goal that could justify its expenditure of effort. She knew also that her life would not be tolerable if he were not always there to crush gently her smooth hands with his strong short fingers' (TR, 431). The potential revolution ('split') realised by the feminine is contained and closed ('crushed') in deference to the traditional narrative.

The formal ideological structure of the text could be read as a parody of Jane Austen's *Emma*, where the relationship between an individual and society is problematised and highlighted through the male / female relationship, and centres its attention on the ritual of marriage. West's own marriage (which took place six years before this novel's publication) motivated a desire to draw up an account of difference, to make a statement about it as a ritual which reconciles perpetuating conflicts. The first page of *The Thinking Reed* describes Isabelle in a tone reminiscent of that which introduces Emma Woodhouse in that novel's exposition. 'She was beautiful, she was nearly exceedingly rich, she had been tragically widowed, there was an exotic distinction about her descent from an Orleanist family which had never lost its French character, though it had been settled in St. Louis when that was a fur station in Louisiana' (TR, 3). In the same way as Emma's society represents a textualised society of the real, Isabelle's can be read as a proliferation, a loosening of

control over that text. Thus, by the conclusion of the narrative, the contradictions are salient rather than restrained, the pervasive modernist tone of unresolvable tension pronounced, and dramatised by the uneasy reconciliation between Marc and Isabelle. This position stand in marked contrast to the 'perfect happiness of the union' described between Emma and Mr. Knightley.⁶⁴

By concentrating attention on the wealthy class of industrial capitalists in France, the narrative reveals at every point the collapse of an era whose financial and moral fate is doomed. Yet against that grain is marked a desperate effort to cling to, and to secure a satisfactory male / female relationship. The early 1920s in France had enjoyed industrial expansion and increasing material prosperity. Towards the end of the decade, however, the imminent collapse of the financial world was looming large. The conflict caused by these opposing trends reinforced a sense of uncomfortable incongruity. The earlier mood of confidence in the industrial capitalist system still lingered over the growing doubts about its durability as an ideal model. Thus a voice of irony complements the spirit of the age West seems eager to convey, since it involves a dissimulation, or even an opposition between assertion and experience in the current situation. It collapses the idea of the stability of order and faith in an apparently transparent unambivalent relationship between form and meaning. By extension, the text itself may be read as an effect of irony since the repeated assertions about the virtues of order and reason (in thought, in expression) only point to the inadequacy of such terms as

strongholds on knowledge (on the textual form). Reason and order become the cover for the repression of the contradictions of identity.

Although of French descent, Isabelle has hitherto spent much of her life in America. She is anxious to end an affair with André de Verviers, whose passion for the melodramatic in their relationship has convinced her that there is no more to it than that. She believes that Laurence Vernon, a Virginian, a quiet character who cultivates culture and refinement, would be better suited to her as a marriage partner. So she plans and stages a scene of violence, to convince de Verviers that her own performances could be potentially dangerous to him. However, Vernon is witness to the scene and withdraws his interest in Isabelle. To disguise her sense of humiliation, she rashly agrees to marry a persistent suitor, Marc Sallafranque, a powerful industrialist who adores her. Isabelle gradually comes to love and respect Marc too, and so is delighted when she finds she is pregnant. One evening Marc becomes involved in a game of baccarat at the casino and so makes himself vulnerable to personal and public disgrace. (After the war the government had granted him large sums of money to rebuild and extend his family business. Fearing the resentful unrest of the workers, ministers forbade Marc to squander his wealth by gambling in public). To save Marc from ruining his reputation, Isabelle distracts the attention of those in the gaming room by causing a scene. Although she rescues his credibility, the tragic consequence of her action is the loss of her child. she undergoes a period of deep depression and revulsion from Marc. Finally, however, she dismisses the idea of divorce,

finding that she still loves and needs him, despite the imperfections of their relationship.

The linear narrative of *The Thinking Reed* conforms in its skeletal plot structure to a tradition of bourgeois^{es} convention and social acceptability, despite the narrative obsession with the imminence of arbitrariness and anarchic inchoateness in human experience. Trying to understand, to know and distinguish the concepts of 'order' and 'chaos', the text ties itself in explanatory knots which are only undone at the expense of its dismantling as an 'orderly' narrative. 'What a frightening world this is, if the wisdom of one day is the folly of the next! It makes being wise seem not worth while, yet I am sure that there is nothing else worth doing. (431).

The Thinking Reed takes the form of debate: between the narrator and her characters, between the characters, either speaking for or contradicting their producer, in a bid to know - to know subjectivity, the other(s), and their interdependence. The epigraph which prefaces the novel suggests knowledge as a form of power, but a power through which humanity realises its limitation, its mortality. It appears that Isabelle's conventionalised mind wants this imposed limitation: demands it and lacks it. Part of the quote from Pascal's *Pensées* reads: 'if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and the advantage which the universe has over him; the universe knows nothing of this'. The words recall Isabelle's need for Marc

'to crush gently her smooth hands with his strong, short fingers' (TR, 431). She desires (the narrator's text desires) the restrictions Marc and patriarchal society ('the universe'?) together impose on her; neither narrator nor character can be contained by that restriction.

As the character who filters most of the third person narrative, Isabelle's voice possesses an authority denied to other characters, and recuperates the female, subjective perspective silenced in '*The Abiding Vision*'. Isabelle, like Lulah and Lily is the partner of a business tycoon. Isabelle's vision may be read as an inversion of Sam's in '*The Abiding Vision*', perhaps filling in some of the gaps in the unarticulated perspective of Lulah, which in the shorter text is obscured. Paradoxically, both Marc and Sam (in the short story) are the figures who wield the greater social and economic power, though both their positions are destabilised through exposure of the means by which they achieve their status. While Isabelle is at times treated ironically by her narrator, for the most part the two are shown to collude, thereby adding authority to Isabelle's vision.

In her synopsis of the novel, West wrote that 'the two themes of this book are the effect of riches on people, and the effect of men on women, both forms of slavery, of forced adaptation, against which the individual with a sense of her individuality is bound to struggle'.⁶⁶ The struggle both for and against adaptation is a tension running through the narrative. While the gendered text consciously resists the consideration of

experience that is not constructed within the limits of hierarchical polar oppositions: male/female, order/chaos, reason/emotion - 'A voice [West's?] advised her coldly from the remote recesses of her mind: Had you not better learn to put up with men, since there is no third sex here on earth? Or have you made arrangements for travelling to some other planet where there is greater variety? (TR, 420) - the 'unknown' of the text delights in the 'greater variety' of an 'other planet'.

The discourse of the text, a posited 'wisdom', articulates its incapacity to contain itself (its masks of discipline are interrogated by their failings) and it cannot maintain self-containment or, for that matter, extricate itself from such an effort.⁶⁷ At intervals in the narrative, Isabelle is sent letters from a paternalistic Uncle Honoré, who appears only through his correspondence, offering 'to lay at her disposal the store of wisdom he had collected during his long life' (TR, 125). It is he who warns Marc and Isabelle of the imminent collapse of the stock market. He postpones a visit to France in order to try to preserve their wealth. His continued absence serves, on a figurative level, to maintain the security (maintain the narrative coherence). The line of narrative traces an apparently neat pattern of connection (the marriage of Isabelle and Marc), division (Isabelle's miscarriage and subsequent breakdown), and reparation (the reconciliation between the couple). In order to save Marc and the structure and economic organisation he represents (and which she despises), Isabelle sacrifices her child, sacrifices her potential maternity to save her husband's name, to secure both their social

positions. Since the social scene is bitterly (if humorously) satirised throughout, the loss seems a cruel waste, the motive for 'saving' the marriage questionable, and the closure strains against its attractive image of security. Isabelle, having determined that her reconciliation with Marc is 'absolute' goes on to muse that 'all the same, it is terrible what men do to women. Even if we annihilate the emotions it sets up, we cannot pretend it has no consequences'. (TR,420). At the novel's conclusion the year is 1929, so the financial crash is also looming: 'the market is cracking' (TR,428). Retrospective knowledge of its effects in 1936, the year of publication, further disturbs the packaged end.

Despite the range of of narrative subject, style and form which an introductory reading of West's texts finds, common features do emerge and, I think, are worth reflecting on briefly here. A few lines from a 1913 article by West, describing a trip to Spain, will help to focus my comments.

But it has suddenly come about that England is no place for a respectable virgin martyr; it blunts the fine edge of the sword of the soul to live in a peace maintained by the torture of women. If I had stayed in England any longer I should have become as satisfied as any proprietor of a slaughter-house that God's in his Heaven, all's right with

the world. So I looked round for a country that was not given over to the devil, who is the eternal fomentor of law and order. The news that King Alfonso was being specially guarded drove me to Spain: happy is the country where they know at whom to throw their bombs. €€

The passage above, though written before West had embarked on any of her longer pieces of fiction, can be read as the territory which locates the textual forms and structures occupied by her later narratives.

While at one level a reader of West's fiction is induced to feel 'as satisfied as any proprietor': in possession of a narrative which is coherent and meaningful, it is the accompanying awareness that she might be in charge of a 'slaughter-house' that qualifies any such complacency and compels her to 'look around' for signs of a different country. Here the sharply humorous irony effects the split: the differences and disjunctions which constitute not only the discrepancies between the narrator and her texts, the reader and the texts, but also the texts within themselves. The disunities manifest themselves in different ways.

A particularly striking feature of all the works of fiction is the violence and death which is recurrent not only in their plots, but in the achievement of their apparent order, in the projection of their totalities. Whether it is through the haunting images of war conceded to by women in subordinate devotion to a masculine ideal, as in *The Return of the Soldier*, or the domestic brutality silently suffered by Marion in *The*

Judge, and the eponymous character of *Sunflower*, or the killing of Kamensky, the double-agent, in *The Birds Fall Down*, who professed to contain the contradictions of political ideology, the 'peace' to which these events give rise, the endings of one story (in preparation for another), is a parody of a conventional notion of a work of art: the deathly stillness of stability.

As the voice in the passage above expresses her dissatisfaction with her location, each of the narratives is motivated in some way by a movement away from one place to another - geographical as well psychological. Often the instigation for movement comes from elsewhere: both Isabelle in *The Thinking Reed* and Laura in *The Birds Fall Down* feel they have never been in control of the path their lives have taken; in *The Judge* Ellen finds herself moving in a direction opposed to her ambitious imaginings. The movement away from a familiar place paradoxically foregrounds the subjects' attachments to what has been left behind: new situations are confronted with inherited meanings and experiences. So movement is never a straightforward A>B project. In the *Saga*, Rose's period of breakdown represents the suspension of movement between territories; *Sunflower* finds the satisfaction for her desires in the world of her imagination; while Jenny's perspective in *The Return of the Soldier* seeks relief on the plane of spiritual stillness. Characters such as Lulah in 'The Abiding Vision' and *Harriet Hume*, however, refuse direction altogether. The irony which allows the men to speak their stories grants, in Lulah's case, a defiant silence, and in *Harriet's*, a playful refusal to

fix meaning. In all the narratives, in the same way that their narrator moves in and out of step with their passage, the principal female characters are both simultaneously involved in and aloof from their stories' 'direction'.

West remarks that 'England is no place for a respectable virgin martyr'; her words suggest another reason for the movement: an unease with subject(ed) positions in the texts, a sense of being out of step with the conventionall (temporal) order. To be respectable is important to many of the female characters - it affords acknowledgement by a public convention. Yet to be respectable and also a martyr is a heavy demand: to become the sacrifice as the price for a desired place in the story. To reject subjection to martyrdom, however, involves the risk of losing conventional acceptability. To refuse the proffered attractions of living 'in a [textuall] peace maintained by the torture of women', the reader moves between different perspectives, to look at the other sides of that peace.

The focus on 'God in his heaven', and on the King in West's short narrative, marks a general preoccupation in her fiction with hierarchical structures: familial (*The Judge, Cousin Rosamund*), sexual (*Harriet Hume, Sunflower*), political and religious (*The Return of the Soldier, The Birds Fall Down*) and economic (*The Thinking Reed, 'The Abiding Vision'*). If the patterns serve to structure, to scaffold a formal pattern in the texts, the very process of narrative throws any singular meaning into treacherous confusion (as the next chapter will show), so that the 'devil' can become

'the eternal fomentor of law and order'. Unities are shattered, tidy couples and binaries disrupted. As public history is rewritten into private stories, as it is repeatedly in West's fiction, common knowledge is reviewed, and takes on different aspects, significances. The mock flippancy of the comment that 'happy is the country where they know at whom to throw their bombs', expresses how the explosion of sovereign myths uncovers textual challenges to the narrative forms.

The disruption of meanings through the interplay of conflicting narratives is not the only way in which the texts' authority is problematised, however, as the concluding section of this chapter aims to show.

The challenge of the semiotic

In 1928 West wrote a review in excited praise of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

There does not seem any reason at all to doubt that in this book has been issued a poetic masterpiece of the first rank; that is, a work which illuminates an important part of human experience by using words to do more than describe the logical behavior of matter, by letting language by its music and its power to evoke images convey meanings too subtle and too profound to be formed in intellectual statements.⁶⁹

West's passion for music - 'There is more music in the world than is allowed to change into heard sound and prove its point'⁷⁰ - was inherited from her mother, and attuned her ear to the poetry of language; she held on to a faith in the supremacy of sound and rhythm over the symbolic formulations of language. In 'The Strange Necessity' she commented that 'a great many quite good plays could be performed with rhythmic howls in the place of dialogue and lose almost nothing by the change'.⁷¹

Her comments suggest the relationship between the symbolic and semiotic effects which are the constituent features of language. The semiotic, as expounded by Julia Kristeva, consists of a rhythmic, pulsional pressure (the 'music', the 'power' of which West speaks) exerted on symbolic language. This semiotic effect, 'preceding meaning and signification, mobile, amorphous, but already regulated',⁷² is a residue of the subject's pre-Oedipal phase, when the child, in dyadic partnership with its mother's body ('a sort of natural / social continuum'⁷³) is a bundle of instinctual, heterogeneous, life and death drives. On entry into the symbolic order - the realm of social and cultural institutions, which includes language and the Law of the Father - this semiotic process is repressed, as the child acquires subjectivity, learns to articulate language, and identifies her/his world in terms of the relative positioning of subject and object, and of apparently stable meanings, realities. The semiotic, however, continues to challenge the definitives through negativity, by exerting a disruptive pressure on symbolic language, in the form of rhythm, contradiction, and silences. In its

marginal aspect, the semiotic is thus similar to the feminine dimension of (patriarchal) language referred to in the first chapter.

Much of the energy in West's own narratives is generated by the images, rhythm, colour ('stains which refer to passing moods' (S, 206)), sound - the power of a sensual textuality, or semiotic, a voice and a body which perform as metaphors of challenge to the symbolic order through which an apparently unitary subject(ivity) is constituted. While the semiotic supports the symbolic, it represents its otherness, and also threatens its organisation and the stability of its meanings.

Although she often wrote detailed synopses of her storylines before embarking on their composition, West's texts, as I have argued above, demonstrate a refusal to be contained by a straight, forward, monologic line. The semiotic, the marginal which challenges the symbolic order represented by the narrative also offers a potential difference from the paternal text, which, as we have seen in West's fiction regularly constructs a narrative which privileges men and subordinates women in the production of a socially conventional harmony.

Rita Felski criticises French theorists for their apparent derision of a symbolic discourse which they regard as inherently phallogentric and repressive, and their privileging of a 'hypostatization of the text as a site of negation, heterogeneity, indeterminacy and so on' as a 'radical signifying practice'.⁷⁴ Such practice, she argues, ignores the significance of the function of literature as meaningful in relation to a broader social context. I would not wish to suggest that the semiotic

satisfies the lack which the symbolic narrative expresses, or to value it as the feminine difference that can save feminism, rescue women. (How could it?) Rather, I see the semiotic in West's narrative texts as performing a subversive function, by demonstrating, performing another place. The semiotic suggests its difference from the 'meaning' of the narrative, that is, from the context (on which it depends) which makes it (in)articulate, and insists on its difference from itself (through its movement, rhythm). As such, it motivates attention to different meanings, reminding the reader of the instability of posited truths. West's texts have it both ways: naming and reluctance to name, fixing and disturbing the fix; telling and untelling the stories.

The dispute between symbolic and semiotic is particularly prominent in one of West's early texts, *The Judge*, whose discourse is swollen by an energy of cavorting undiscipline, whose (often tortuous) sentences are always digressing from the direction of the narrative. Powerful voices drive the text onwards and downwards (from the heights of the Scottish Pentlands to the flats of the Essex plains) like a stone through water. But as the stone falls, it sends out ripples across the surface of the water in widening circles. The rhythm, imagery and metaphors (the circles which surround the stone) play a counterpoint to the directional text: they temper feelings of despair and yet are indeterminate. For example, as Ellen's mother approaches death, and her daughter sits at her side in the hospital, memories of their shared past are foregrounded, setting at a distance the imminence of Mrs Melville's end. At one point, Ellen remembers the occasion

when they had watched the fish-wives of Dunbar sitting on tubs under great flaring torches set in sconces on the wall behind them, gutting herrings that slid silver under their quick knives and left blood on their fingers that shone like a fluid jewel, raw-coloured to suit its wearer's weathered rawness, and lay on the cobbles as a rich, dark tessellation. (J,191).

The image, while brutal, offers a visual sensation which is bold and immediate. The light of the torches, the gleam of the fish, and the translucence of blood, scintillate with gorgeous colours quickened by alliterative movement.

Rebecca West once told a friend that she could bear any criticism of *The Judge* so long as you don't say it is unrestrained and too exuberant'. And 'I don't see why you can't have a rich complex beauty. I hate the indiscriminate pursuit of concentration. I believe it has been the dessication [sic] of many a talent'.⁷⁵ Wells criticised West's fictional prose style precisely because he felt that its textuality distracted attention from its form: with reference to *The Judge*, he commented that 'she writes like a loom, producing her broad rich fabric with hardly a thought of how it will make up into a shape'.⁷⁶

The enjoyment and yet simultaneous insecurity, a defiance of spartan order (conscious or unconscious) expressed by West is a thematic as well as stylistic feature of the text. It demonstrates forcibly a tension between paternity and maternity. The text of the father, the more easily

recognisable because socialised, 'familiar', directs the plot narrative in symbolic language. The text of the maternal, the semiotic, recognisable as an effect - a how-ness rather than a what-ness because of its continuous motion - dramatizes a sheer exuberant energy, and a voice which counters the linear drag to a 'fated' end. The almost palpable sensuality of the language refuses a straight path, choosing instead to linger, insinuate in synchronic contradistinction to the diachronic narrative. The tension reinforces the thematic opposition between feminine protest and a restrictive authority. West's comments, made in 1920, on the characteristics of women's fiction writing not only summarise this idea; they are also apposite descriptions of her own work (to come) in *The Judge* as well as in her other texts, and go some way to accounting for the language of semiotics, and its potential for relation to women's writing and to the feminine.

Nearly every good novel which has ever been written by a woman bears a stamp which proclaims beyond all doubt that it is the work of a woman. It would be hard to say exactly what that stamp is, though it certainly depends in part on the presence of a turbulent romanticism, a gusto in creating exciting events just because they are exciting events, which is natural enough in a sex that is too often condemned to spend its life waiting for things which do not happen, and a belief that happiness in love satisfies all the soul's demands on the universe.⁷⁷

W. Somerset Maugham warned West that a metaphor 'being a comment by the author, pulls up the reader and so for a moment destroys his absorbing interest in the narrative. It reminds him that it is not life that he is living but a book that he is reading'.⁷⁸ Yes. The woman writing has regularly found that her desire is displaced through the text: 'We can so seldom declare what a thing is except by saying it is something else'.⁷⁹ The structure of *The Judge* demonstrates that there is more than one authoritative version of 'life': why should metaphor be the slave to the master text? The 'absorbing interest in the narrative', its effect of pulling the reader in its aspect of inevitability, suggests a shrugging of the shoulders response, a passive acquiescence to one of life's 'true' stories. The metaphor by contrast (and the rhythms, echoes and silences which inform it) juxtaposes apparently disparate objects, ideas. Their condensation extends and modifies significance: expression itself becomes the locus of change.

In *Sunflower* the synchronic effects of the pictures - images, metaphors and motifs which crowd Sunflower's imagination and disrupt the evenness of a singular story line go some way to alleviating the eponymous character's / reader's feelings of dissatisfaction. By their extension and repetition they conflate dimensions of time into visual space. Apart from their visual power, the pictures also impress on sound and a pulsional rhythm, a repetition whose cyclical movement spells not monotony but a continuity, a power of generation. The realising and fleshing out of Sunflower's imaginings - a fluid merging of dreams, memories and desires - recalling the fiction of fantasy referred to

above: 'violating a normal or common sense perspective which represents reality as a coherent, single viewed entity'.⁸⁰

The pictures represent a resistance to the 'logical' development of the discourse which Sunflower finds alienating. The place is imaged as a jungle-like environment, lush and green, in which Sunflower is formed both as an individual and as an indistinguishable aspect of the greenery that saturates the scene which evokes a sense of inclusive spatiality.:

Suddenly a great gust of pleasure at his presence passed over her, and it seemed to her as if she were in a high place, where the air was very clear. Woods ran down to a lake, the green fire of young leaves crackling among the tree tops; the milder mirrored woods ran out into the lake, the leaves' fire quenched to a paste of green jewels. She stood among the rocks by the water. Something like the fire of the leaves crackled all around her; and within her the mirrored woods were troubled, they were fluted into ribs of thick glass. There was coming a canoe that was driven forward to her, to the fire that crackled round her and in her, by a man with strong arms, with broad shoulders, who cried to her across the water, a round mouthed cry without words. (S, 49)

The lines demarcating one object from another: woods and trees and leaves and lake, as well as colour and sound are blurred and run into one another, becoming interchangeable. Water becomes glass; the colour

of leaves is transformed into an element: the fire which in turn is transformed into glittering gems. The reflections thrown up by the water become different pictures, become part of Sunflower. The edenic scene (at the wings of which is the man in the canoe) suggests Lacan's Imaginary, the pre-Oedipal period (of the semiotic), where there is no separation between subject and object, and no sense of alienation from the world 'out there'. Sunflower emerges from this fantasy-dream with the self-rebuke that 'it was silly to have daydreams when one was grown-up' (S,49).

The repeated evocation of this jungle scene may be contrasted with Sunflower concentratedly telling herself a 'fairy tale' (S,149), a different story where she imagines a trip to Cannes with Francis Pitt, a future conditional (social) story. The fact that Sunflower has deliberately and repeatedly to make sure that 'nothing should break the thread of the fairy tale' (S,149), maintains that story as a familiar narrative line, pushing female desire into an acceptable (conventional) groove.

The *Sunflower* text has^{as} one of its central concerns the problem of a language whose current power organization is such that a masculine privileging of the rational and the logical suppresses those 'other thing[s]' (S,155) to which Sunflower repeatedly returns. Desire ('a darting line of light' (S,193)), happiness ('like clear music bubbling on and on' (S,239-40)), sensuality and love - these are all suggested by images rather than narrative description. Sunflower is at once in awe of and dissatisfied with the rationalising, logocentric world, within whose

milieu contemporary politics, business, art and sciences are esteemed above life: 'man talk ... hard, metallicly glittering, fire-spun, incomprehensible' (S,161). As a means of communication, Sunflower finds the language of her social peers grossly inadequate and alienating. In conversation with a stranger, from whom she feels distant because of their difference in social status, she reflects that had they 'both been inarticulate they might have found it easier to understand each other'. She contrasts her 'clear, rounded sentences and definite gestures', and the fact that they should 'proceed from a condition that was not at all satisfying', with the man's more favourable 'broken, inadequate, stockish mutterings' (S,5).^{e1}

The language that formulates the conceptual world inevitably misses out on or ignores the being of the body and is therefore inauthentic. This notion accords with the Lacanian notion of subjectivity which is founded on lack. 'If we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-meaning. If we choose meaning, the meaning survives only deprived of that part of non-meaning that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realization of the subject, the unconscious.'^{e2} While a necessary condition of the subject's constitution as such involves the repression of 'non-meaning', therefore, the structuring of the contemporary social environment in general, and the localised and specific context of personal, public and political life within which the text is positioned, imposes further restrictions on subjects: both men and women. Of Essington we learn that 'he cared only for thick books, for interminable talks about ideas that would go on being true if the human body had no flesh on its bones, if trees were not green in summer,

if there were no such thing in the world as sound' (S,6). The idea of Essington's hollow world is countered by the cumulative expression (which becomes almost breathless, wordless, as it winds in sensual images to its picture) of a physical, sensual world. Sound and the voice are opposed to the word: the rhythmic continuity of the former placed in conradistinction to the illusory roundness of the latter (which in effect, spells finality). Verbal fluency, articulacy (*articulare* - to divide into joints) are connotative of separation as well as definitive coherence. In the world of Sunflower's imagination, Francis Pitt is described as calling out to her in 'a round mouthed cry without words' (S,49). (He is elsewhere, and in a social context, felt by her to have a voice which 'was full of character, though his words had none' (S,152.)) In more confident mood, Sunflower actively distrusts the rhetoric which Pitt and Essington employ - the questions which they pose for effect, never expecting an answer. Where they leave a mark of silence, Sunflower feels meaning could reside by the active interrogation of important problems.

Of course, Sunflower cannot escape thought (language) despite, or more accurately perhaps, because of herself. She 'wanted to move on, to go to some place where she would be distracted and would not think. Since she was stupid there was no good her thinking' (S,26). Her desire for distraction - for being pulled in different directions - strains against the straitjacket of fixing meaning.

It is interesting to notice that those passages in West's texts where the sound, the rhythm of the language are particularly affective, are

located where the narrative themes are concerned with processes of life and death, and with their combative tension: the semiotic impulse destroys the symbol and generates difference. The last lines of *The Judge* are a case in point.

She leaned back against the slope and waited. This was a good place to wait. The call of the redshanks, the cloud shadows that moved over the marshes like the footprints of invisible presences, made her feel calm.

Nevertheless her heart could not help but beat quick with fear. She wished that he would come and comfort her. but though he had left the fisherman he was not coming straight to her. He had climbed the sea-wall and was looking out to the east, to the open sea, over the country of the mud. He was thinking of Marion and wondering where the tide had carried her. The inexorable womb was continuing to claim its own. She wanted to start up and cry out to him and hail him noisily from his obsession; but something in the place, in the call of the redshanks, in the procession of the shadows, reminded her that when she had cried out before she had brought death upon her lover. This quietness was the safer way. She would wait patiently until he came to make his exorbitant demand.

She sat and looked at the island and wondered whether it was a son or daughter that waited for her there. (J,430)

While the narrative expresses a sense of resignation and passivity, a contradictory impulse motivated largely by sound - assonance and alliteration - ricochets, reverberates, moving against the direction of patient 'quietness', articulates the voice that Ellen's voice in the narrative desists from using.

In *Sunflower* perhaps the most crucial (and recurring) image in the novel is that representing the burial of Sunflower's mother. The event is relived through the character's memory as a figuration of both the pre-narrative and the end of narrative: the image of life in death, the impossible Imaginary.

They had lowered her mother's body into the grave. It lay there in its coffin, finished. And round the hole in the earth stood four black figures, Lily, Mabel, Maurice and herself, who but for that body would not have been there. Who had been made by it out of nothing! And now they were putting this marvel-making body in the ground, as if the proper time to sow was after it had germinated and engendered its plant. She had gaped at that extraordinary rite. It had seemed to bring to the surface of life a process that nobody talked about, that could hardly be seen, that she could not have told Essington about at all; that was the most important thing in the world. She didn't know what it was or what it did, but she knew what it was like. It was savagely persistent, it was at once miraculous and the soul of

the natural, it went on and on to some aim(S,34)

The 'process' is non-verbal, or the reversal of narrative, as well as being its impetus. As the passage tries to articulate the 'meaning' of the image, its language is seen to struggle after some 'explanation', to repeat itself, and finally, tending towards monosyllable, to lose itself as a vague, unfinished finity ('some aim...'); the insistence on 'it ... it.. it...' naming what refuses conceptualisation.

In *The Thinking Reed*, the passage that describes Isabelle's first awareness that she is expecting a child can be read as representing an interface with the one quoted above: death and life are fused.

For her world had gathered itself into a Catherine-wheel of very pure colours. She had been listening to the sound of the horses' hooves on the snow-covered ice, and as they travelled nearer she had felt the hammered rhythm in the soles of her feet, her spine, her temples. She had enjoyed participating in the rhythm of the rushing brutes, knowing a pleasure she had not known since as a child she had galloped around her nursery, pretending to be a lion or a tiger. But then suddenly from within herself had come a counter-motion so potent that it nearly brought her to her knees. It was brief, it was the feeblest possible flutter. But it brought down a new rhythm like a hammer on the other rhythm that was hammering on the ice, making her heart stop, revealing to her that she possessed lengths of intestines of

which her mind had not taken an inventory, convincing her that nothing could possibly happen outside her nearly so extraordinary as what was happening inside her. The white peaks spun together, the pinewoods spun up to the pure sky, but she brought them back to order by her deep, quiet breathing. (TR, 145-46)

A circular motion (Catherine wheel, repetition, echo, the world turned upside down, the heart stop) obstructs the temporal linearity, the horses running on; their rhythm, the power outside Isabelle, is challenged. The 'counter-motion' - 'so potent' and yet 'the feeblest possible flutter' creates in Isabelle an awareness of inner space which is not subject to 'logical' operations of the mind: knowledge through time. The body is at first assaulted: soles, spine, temples. Then it asserts its own potency: '[it] brought down a new rhythm like a hammer on the other rhythm that was hammering on the ice'. The monotonous persistence of a continuous past is overlaid by a complete and incisive action which establishes itself as a new continuum ('was happening' inside her'). Rereading this passage for a second time, with the knowledge of Isabelle's miscarriage, does give it a cruelly poignant irony, but cannot diminish its energy.

3.

**Relations of power;
figuring authority in the texts**

But always when I thought of my father's disappearance and his probable, or rather certain death... I was overcome by an abstract sense of grief, something like the moan of shingle dragging back to the sea between breakers, although I made no sound, (*TRN*,164)

I had a glorious father, I had no father at all. (*FD*,274)'

And do you think we will have to spend every night searching for your mother ... ?' (*J*,417)

It was frightening, when one wanted one's mother, for her to want her mother too, (*BFD*,18)

The inherent formal and structural contradictions examined in the second chapter, which the (w)hole text represents to obscure, reverberate, most often quite explicitly, through the textual (dis)contents of West's fictions, which it will be the present chapter's task to explore.

Rose's response to the loss of her father in *This Real Night*, and Rebecca West's complex of feelings towards her own father are signs of the recurrent narrative attitude to extant figures of authority, to patriarchy, in the fictional texts. A lingering faith in the infallibility of the 'glorious father', haunted by a troubling equivocation, ('probable, or rather certain death') expresses the reluctance of the subject to admit the death of, let alone challenge the traditional (figurative) father, since such an admission would seem to open the floodgates to a chaotic

uncertainty. Often, the absence is gestured rather than voiced, making 'no sound'; it is, nevertheless, vividly present(ed): 'the moan of shingle dragging back to the sea'. While the fathers' absent presence dominates the scene, the position of the mothers, though significant, is socially precarious. The subject (son or daughter), for whom the mother is, in a very real and practical sense, a source of love, comfort and protection, is disoriented to find this figure herself wanting for (personal) love and (social) authority. Kaja Silverman states the position.

The desire of the mother, like that of the daughter or son, has its origins elsewhere, finds its inspiration and support in a symbolic field which is invested at all points with the desire for paternal authority. If she desires the phallus, and identifies it with the father, that is because she too finds herself subjected to the desire of the Other - to a cultural network which reifies the father by inserting his 'name' into a signifying chain in which it enjoys close proximity to other privileged signifiers: 'law', 'money', 'power', 'knowledge', 'plenitude', 'authoritative vision' etc. It is also because she is defined in opposition to these signifiers'.²

For much of the time in West's fiction the father is standing for something rather than standing: figuring rather than being; conversely the mother is bound to so much being (body for others) that she is denied the right to author-eyes: creating, defining and modifying a position *from her own* sights. Much of the fiction as I read it, therefore, is a process of exposing the rigidity and inadequacy of authoritative (op)positions in

respect of human subjects, and the struggle for a barely glimpsed, alternative potential.

This chapter will seek to demonstrate how specific patriarchal figures, systems and traditions - individual, familial, cultural and institutional - come to be idolised by the (inevitably) conventionalised woman ('I was born to acquiesce in patriarchy' (FO,307)) and ironised by the marginalised feminine ('It was funny the way that men have special ways of being ridiculous that they agree not to consider ridiculous' (S,57)). By extension, those individuals and institutions will be shown as figuring a paradox: they are signs of lack, of absence and of frustration, but also represent the enduring loci of personal, social and economic control. As such they have the means to regulate authorised versions of women; and women, deprived of the right to authorship, of the power to sign their own names, come to fear as well as fantasise being granted such a possibility. They become slaves to the master directors, performing (uncomfortably) roles within an acceptable convention. Often the sense of self-alienation becomes so acute that the actresses forego the struggle for directive control of their performance.

The privileged (mostly male) authorities are desired by West's marginalised women for the real and apparent benefits they obtain, ironised for their claim to illusory value, and revered as that hoped-for answer, as the alluring space of possible self-fulfilment. This complex and contradictory response, comparable to the notion of the narrative palimpsest considered in the previous chapter, has its base in women's historically ambiguous relationship to themselves and to others. The chapter examines this

relationship as it is produced in West's fictional treatment of the family, extended and complicated as the woman is placed and perceives herself in her relations to men and women outside the home, as a single or married woman, mediated by influences of the social, political and economic backdrops of the twentieth century stage.

In much of West's fiction the reader confronts time and again both a critique and yet an apparent affirmation of the rigidity of hegemonic psychic and social forms which appear to reflect and reinforce the ideologies of traditional Western thought. In her persistent striving to make sense of her world, West tended to look at life in ultimately dualist terms: as we have seen, the influences of Freud, Jung, and the principles of Manicheanism are unmistakeable in her work. Yet time and again her writing evidences unease with any such clear-cut distinctions. In addition, although the reader is at liberty to deconstruct the binaries posited by West, and to undermine their value as final truths, she cannot deny their effective manipulative power as historical, social, ideological and psychological forces.

The family

The importance of her family to Rebecca West cannot be overemphasised. Her family was a theme she needed to turn around and write over and over, especially as she became older: as though rewriting the family was a means of understanding and coming to terms with her own life. It is significant that the most autobiographical of her fiction, the saga trilogy, like her

family memoirs, remained unfinished at her death; yet both were being rewritten almost until the end.

For Cissie, her father's seeming rejection of his family was so painful that she later devoted much emotional energy to denying that it had happened ...[She] was to compose countless written versions of her parents' marriage and its unhappy end Most often the versions that she wanted the public and her own descendants to accept was the one that she needed for her own comfort'.³

Once this familial figure of authority is toppled from his pedestal, women/girls, whose identities have largely been defined through domestic and personal relationships with reference to the position of the father, are forced to question and reassess their own place in the frame: as marginalised subjects, and as individuals who have, nevertheless, probably modelled their dream of independence and authority on a male paradigm. In other words, when the figure of the idealized father, which has traditionally 'provide[d] the possibility of separation, the release from ambivalence, and the access to a reality outside the confines of the family'⁴ is questioned as insufficient, a sense of chaos, uncertainty and instability confront the disoriented subject. Once the symbolic and real fathers are no longer tolerable on their own exclusive (authoritative) terms, the prospect of striving for a new and different position looms large, though because unsupported by tradition or convention is also frightening. During the first half of this century the currents of feminism which challenged established roles of women, and particularly of wives and

mothers, were being resisted by an overwhelming ideology which sought (apart from during the war years) to keep women at home. Rebecca West experienced the pain of family life through her parents' difficult marriage, and through her own very different but also troubled relationship with Wells, with their son Anthony, and with her husband, Henry Andrews. Each of her fictional narratives faces, with varying degrees of directness, the less than ideal realities of family life in general, their influential and regularly restrictive effects on both sexes, but particularly on girls and women. Significantly, the narratives also reveal the vulnerability of family relationships which do not conform to the ideal model in any but a superficial way. Such critiques are countered by the Rebecca West who clung to an image of the mythic unity of the family (through the abiding memory of moments of the joy and love it did certainly offer from time to time) which was only rarely her own experience, in an effort to stave off threats to her own self-assurance and security.

West's *Cousin Rosamund: A Saga of the Century* is a trilogy where the illusion of family serenity and unity is doggedly recalled and reiterated, in the face of the narrator's simultaneous admission of its fallacy. At the same time as working on the *Saga*, West was also engaged in writing *The Birds Fall Down*: another fictional net, but one which caught and gave voice to the louder disruptions, disquiet and uneasy suspicions quelled by or expelled from the *Saga*. Victoria Glendinning aptly comments that the *Saga* recounts the 'intimate agony of family life'.⁶ And the narrator, Rose, describes as 'touching', 'these efforts of our mother and father to protect us from knowledge of their conflict, with which we were familiar as anything on earth' (FO, 63)

According to Glendinning, the seeds for the writing of the *Saga* were sown when West was undergoing psychoanalysis in 1927.⁶ The fictionalised autobiography can be read as the textual site for the working out of the relations between self and other, and the problems of identity and sexuality with reference to the family. The latter becomes the focus of extended struggle since it activates a desire which eventually moves outside the immediate familial relation.

The narrative recounts/produces the story of the Aubreys, a family who for West represent 'a mythologised perception of [the] personal past' the Fairfields.⁷ Its form demonstrates the projection of the Family onto the family: the former an ideological structure which defines, directs, locates and tyrannises the family with which it becomes inevitably and inextricably entangled. R.D. Laing refers to the 'fantasy' of the family as an 'internalised' family - that is, 'the family of origin transformed by internalisation, partitioning, and other operations, into the "family" and mapped back onto the family and elsewhere'.⁸ It seems that the distinctions between the so-called 'original' family and the "family" become far from clear cut: since each one takes and then modifies its shape according to the other, so that the notion of any 'original' becomes extremely hazy.

Rose says of her mother, Clare, that 'when our family life was as it is supposed to be on earth, she was as if lifted to heaven' (FQ, 42). The narrator's looking back into childhood from the perspective of an adult, while also repeatedly re-enacting, re-presenting the past as if it were an immediate present in the *Saga*, demonstrates a dualistic process: on the one hand, the retrospective position which the 'I' of Rose takes, creates the

illusion of security, as this authoritative voice clears the haze, the ambiguity, viewing from above, as it were, the family as a still entity, endowing it with the illusory privilege of permanence; on the other hand, at the points where the narrative voice appears to be moving in time with the discourse, tracing the diachronic dispersal and transformation of the family unit, confidence in (the narrator's, the text's and the reader's) stability is threatened and subverted. Thus the attempt to fix the family unit synchronically as a means of overpowering change, conflict, death and the instability of the subject in history is undermined by its very narration - the 'I' moving through the text - and by its (re)reading.

Through the *Saga*, as the father disappears, and the mother takes his 'place' in practical terms (without the social status of recognition that his occupation as father represented), the meaning of maternal and paternal roles demands revision. Kaja Silverman expresses their symbolic interdependence: 'even when actual mothers and fathers strive to fulfil their symbolic roles they can never be equal to the task. This is because "mother" and "father" are binary terms within a closed system of signification, each sustains its value and meaning through relation to the other, and not through any reference to the real'.⁹

The third person narrator of *The Birds Fall Down* makes a far bolder ironic exposé of the myth of family unity than Rose of the *Saga* dares. For Count Nikolai in *The Birds Fall Down*, one of the few remaining consolations of his life is his belief in the stability of the family. 'A family life is one of the few real joys we're vouchsafed here on earth' (*BFD*, 17). And he compares Laura's father to the Godhead: 'All the essence of his being is

confined to his family. He would not give to the outer world any of the feelings he gives to your mother, to your brothers, to you' (BFD, 57). All this is expressed in the apparent ignorance of the narrative's sub-plot: one which traces Edward's adulterous affair with Susie Staunton; aware of the thread of dramatic irony, the reader becomes a conspirator in the act of familial and marital betrayal. (In the *Saga* trilogy, the fact of Piers Aubrey's marital infidelities is only briefly alluded to; it remains marginal to the narrative.)

In the *Saga*, Rose at first tentatively vocalises disloyalty, infidelity to the father, and only slightly louder than her mother who, for the most part refuses to voice her disquiet publicly. Nellie Furman argues that 'in the marital contract, the wife's fidelity or the mother's word guarantees paternal origin and hegemony'.¹⁰ Clare Aubrey absolves Piers from any responsibility, or corrects her 'slips of the tongue' when she doesn't do so. She assumes different voices depending on her position as either public defender or private critic of her husband's unreliability. Composing a letter to Mr Morpurgo, Clare's spoken words contradict the letter she writes, which expresses her deference to her husband. '"The ways of genius are not the ways of ordinary mortals, and so you will not be surprised to hear". Now she spoke to herself. "Oh, why do I always have to bother, why is nothing ever simple. To think that there are women who when they move just have the things put in a van and go". Now her other voice was used...' (FQ, 27).¹¹ Clare Aubrey sternly reminds her children of their father's reliability near the opening of *The Fountain Overflows*; her assertions of trust are exposed as naive, and yet as significant psychological props which cannot be abandoned easily. 'He will never',

[Clare] said, tilting the cup so that Richard Quin would get the last drop, 'fail us' (FQ, 7). The syntactic effects are notable here: the mother feeds her child, bracketed, surrounded, by promises of the father's support: a rhetorical structure which surrounds the maternal activity of sustenance. The assertion, however, is *split*, so that the ideas of, first, negation ('never') and, secondly, neglect ('fail') are separately but emphatically highlighted.

From the opening of the narrative the Aubrey family is perceived as alienated from the wider social context, mainly as a result of Piers' gambling activities. Instead of the father figure providing the link between the family and the social order, he is effectively a block to it. (And as Piers' gambling shakes family unity, Marc's in *The Thinking Reed* destroys family engenderment.) The loyalties of the family members are directed inwards in solidarity, mutual protection and love from the world 'out there'. Only the eldest daughter, Cordelia, is differentiated from the family group. The narrator's obsessive and vehement revulsion from her sister is never more than very thinly disguised: Cordelia is cast as the traitor, who unforgivably betrays her fears and frustrations with the family's unstable predicament. Cordelia appears to be the necessary price paid for investing the family with the qualities of an ideal unit; she certainly disrupts that conception.¹²

Piers Aubrey figures most prominently in the narrative as a physically and emotionally absent presence for Rose. Before the end of this first novel in the *Saga* sequence, he leaves his family without warning, never to reappear except in their evocation of him, and particularly in the pervasive

influence he leaves in his wake as a symbolic father, the letter of the law. As Jessica Benjamin remarks, 'the symbolic dominance of father and phallus is intensified when he is outside the family'.¹³ Clare Aubrey admits: 'even if all his books and papers are still there ... it is no use hoping that he will come back. He has gone.' (*FQ*, 325). Paternal presence is displaced, to be (re)presented by writing, which can never be pure, original or secure in its meaning.¹⁴

While Rose describes him as untypical, 'for certainly some people seemed to have reliable fathers' (*TRN*, 6), the presentation of this father is, nevertheless, a powerful form of figuration: of the Lacanian Name of the Father, of paternal authority and identity, where these are experientially influential signifiers, despite their very constitution as symbols of lack. He stands in the position of contradiction: at once the ideal of familial stability and at the same time the agent of the Aubrey family's insecurity. West's own father seems to have occupied a similar place: in an article entitled 'My Father' she likens Charles Fairfield to Edmund Burke, remarking that both 'went on and on about order and stability while they reeled through space like a couple of drunken comets'.¹⁵

Piers Aubrey represents the impossible fiction the father is expected or claims to fulfil; Rose concedes that 'human relations are essentially imperfect. Supposing that Papa had been the best of fathers, I would still have been hungry' (*FQ*, 45). Attitudes of 'deference without confidence' (*FQ*, 78) shown to Piers by his acquaintances reflect the ambivalent status of masculine authority. 'A genius among writers' (*TRN* 6), Piers repeatedly lets his family down by failing to communicate with them - through either

letter or conversation (except in the note which he leaves his wife telling her of his departure: the word expressing absence). The family's expectation of pleasure from him is repeatedly deferred, but their belief that 'everything in the end was going to be alright' (FQ, 246) persists despite, rather than because of, him. After his disappearance, the family's devotion to Piers is reiterated, and yet sits uncomfortably alongside their resentment of and confusion about his abandonment of them: 'I was aware that my father's desertion of me had never ceased to happen' (CR, 128). Rose's dream of securing her father, and her image of the family as models of stability, is also her dream of asserting self-fulfilment and identity. The delight which Piers inspires in his family 'was not a warming pleasure, but it was glorious' (FQ, 42). The physical coldness is indicative of his distance from their day-to-day lives, and the 'glorious'-ness suggestive of a fine looking figure on a pedestal which cannot provide for immediate needs. Piers finally feels driven to seek his own suicide by his prophetic foreboding of global apocalypse. His role as seer is comparable to the idea of an indifferent God about whom Rose complains to Mr Morpurgo in *Cousin Rosamund*. 'The Father does not save the sparrow. He only knows it has fallen' (CR214).

As the birds fall down in *The Birds Fall Down*, the whole notion of paternal authority, justified through a claim to an abstract 'knowledge', and exercised through an ideological system of domination and repression is challenged. In *The Fountain Overflows*, Rosamund predicts that 'all the trouble the Papas foresee will come down on us. It is we who will have to bear the hardship and do heroic things' (FQ, 308), placing responsibility with the papas themselves, and reckoning who will be left with the debt.¹⁶

Predictably, Rose feels this conversation about paternal failure to be 'impious' (FQ, 307), laying as it does 'an axe at the roots of a tree *which I did not care to identify*' (my italics, FQ, 308). Identifying the tree would mean re-evaluating the position of the 'I', a project which Rose resists. Rosamund, however, possessed of 'another sort of eloquence' (FQ, 167), undermines the father's word through irony and laughter. 'She had not spoken as if she hated my father or her father; she only laughed at them' (FQ, 308).

Piers the individualist also 'vehemently disapproved' of feminism (like West's own father); and Rose is 'chilled by his vast indifference ... to my fate' (FQ, 274). The ultimate contradiction lies in the fact that while Piers tirelessly campaigns for the rights of property owners, he seems to crave his own (and, by extension, his family's) dispossession. One of his many 'paradoxical' qualities is his being 'penniless and discredited and enormously powerful' (FQ, 274). The use of the term 'paradoxical', posits the symbol as a truth: opposites are reconciled rather than set in contradiction. The father's word has no intrinsic, essential value; it obtains 'truth' value from the power - actual and psychological - it wields. Traditionally the sole owner of property, of his wife and children, the father as Piers Aubrey comes to stand for material loss. His wife and his children are the only property he doesn't lose directly to his creditors. 'Your father was debt itself' (RN, 20) admits Clare, and yet his symbolic status overwhelms and outlives his mortality.

Towards the conclusion of the *Cousin Rosamund* narrative, a more confident and sceptical Rose makes a direct link between her own family's attitude to

Piers and the Americans' attitude to the stock market (this is 1929): 'They speak of the stock market as something that has an independent existence and sometimes gives them lots of money. It was their father, they are like us, they are gambled children' (CR, 270).¹⁷ Piers gambles with the products (children) of the mother's labour. His 'independent existence' is guaranteed only by his exploitation of others. The specific relationship between the fathers, the economy and women alluded to here will be considered later in the chapter.

While the figure of Piers Aubrey is re-visioned by various members of his family to fit pleasurably into the pattern of their lives, Edward Rowan in *The Birds Fall Down* is dismantled by the perceptions of his wife, Tania (who unlike Clare Aubrey in the *Saga*, makes no efforts to cover for him), but particularly by those of his daughter, Laura. In a personal revolution which might be read as an extension of the theme of political revolution and treachery which the narrative also addresses, Laura increasingly distances (dis-locates) herself from her own father. At the start of the narrative she admits that he is not really a significant figure in her life and to pretend otherwise would be a sham. His affair with Susie Staunton destroys the illusion of the 'ideal' (BFD, 336) family structure to which Kamensky refers ironically, and in which Count Diakonov reverentially believes, and shatters Laura's sense of stability. (However, the target of contempt is the 'other woman' far more than Edward Rowan himself: she has none of the 'right' of place which he can take for granted.) Only near the novel's conclusion, however, does Laura admit to herself that 'she had stopped loving her father, that he was nothing to her'. The negating of the father's previously privileged position signifies not only the

deterioration of the relationship between father and daughter on a narrative level, but also the weakening credibility of an ideological fantasy system which bears little resemblance to experience. Laura follows her admission with the phrase, 'there shall be no more sea'.¹⁸ By looking into an imagined future, Laura makes a gesture of refusal to the inhuman conformity to ideology which she perceives as a destructive chaos. However, she does experience a wounding (apocalyptic) sense of loss: her heart is described as being 'like glass which had cracked into a thousand sharp-edged fragments' (BFD, 343). More frightening for Rose in *Cousin Rosamund*, acknowledging the death of the father is the admission into her life of a frightening amorphousness - reflected by the 'shingle dragging back to the sea between breakers' (CR, 164). Nevertheless, towards the end of *Cousin Rosamund*, Rose expresses her separation from the paternal figure and what it has represented for her:

I knew what my father felt. There was a rightness in winter; it would be fitting if winter came and was not succeeded by spring and lasted for ever; I would have a sort of sanctity if I denied myself to love and continuity. Only I knew from my mother that such sanctity was evil, was too safe, it meant coming to an end instead of working perpetually. (CR, 239)

The oppressive authority of an imagined permanence, the claustrophobic circle of (w)holiness, the enclosure of the paternalistic family (and of its text), is rejected in favour of openness to the other, and to change.

The mothers in West's texts separately highlight different aspects of the maternal relation to the signs of paternal authority (to which Silverman's comments above refer), but their relationship with their children complicates the dyadic partnership, and particularly demonstrates the disruption of, and the strain upon the traditional family structures. As an institution, motherhood is narrated as a position of oppression and self-sacrifice: *The Judge*, *Sunflower*, and the *Saga* particularly demonstrate it as such.¹⁹ As Kate Clephane, the principal character in Edith Wharton's 1925 novel, *The Mother's Recompense*, muses, they show the place of the mother as having 'her centre of gravity in a life not hers'.²⁰ However, motherhood is also a metaphor in the texts for a utopian, productive and creative and powerful (different) future for women. This potential is highlighted particularly in the mother-daughter bond.

In a discussion of the maternal metaphor in relation to Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, Donna Stanton worries that the valorization of maternity, even as metaphor, while necessary as a counter to paternal domination in culture, is in danger of tending towards an essentialism, which feminists are striving to undermine. She comments that 'metaphor and binarism may be our (present) destiny. But the awareness that sameness permeates all efforts to speak difference, and further, that every alternative practice tends to erect itself as ultimate authority, can instill the imperative of unceasing vigilance and self-interrogation'.²¹ I try to remember her words in the discussion that follows.

In *Cousin Rosamund*, Clare Aubrey's own power is evident in her defensive and protective love of her children: to assert this power she is bound to

challenge the (legendary) power of the father, her husband whom she loves; however she cannot bear to renounce the illusion and legacy of his elevated status. In terms of physical appearance and presence she is, through Rose's child-like eyes, certainly defined in opposition to the fictitious-sounding 'romantically dark' (FQ, 4) Piers.²² Clare was 'not good looking. She was too thin, her nose and forehead were shiny like bone, and her features were disordered because her tortured nerves were always drawing a rake over her face' (FQ, 4). She carries the lines which allow for Piers' attractiveness. Physical stature signifies for the child the degree of conviction which her parents' words carry. Piers' prophecy of global doom, though countered by Clare's belief 'that there would always be a spring' leaves Rose doubtful, since her mother 'was little and thin, much smaller than Piers, and this seemed to me to bear a discouraging significance' (FQ, 160).

Clare makes repeated efforts to glorify the father in *The Fountain Overflows*. She sustains the faith of his 'worshippers' (FQ, 362) even after his disappearance, with the promise that he will return, although she herself does not believe it. In the narrative which follows she does admit his weaknesses to her children, but not without feelings of guilt that she did not allow for them to the end. Clare also informs the children that family portraits which are in their possession, and which the children and Piers have always believed to be copies, are actually originals which when sold would command a high price. Clare explains: 'I had to keep the portraits for your sakes, but it has spoiled everything between your father and myself. This is not fair. Why should I have to choose between treating you properly and treating your father properly?'. Thus, by an action which inverts the traditional stronghold on power, the mother assures a future

for her children, literally and figuratively, by the exchange of women of the paternal (lineage) for the security of wealth for the maternal (descendants). The mother feels torn by her divided loyalties. To be faithful to her children means treachery under patriarchal law, and necessarily ruffles the pattern of family unity. She goes on: 'I love your father and I have not been able to give him every chance. I should have found it easy to do, it would have been no sacrifice for me to strip myself till I had nothing for I could get on with very little, I would not mind not getting on at all. But I could not do it because of you children' (FQ, 345). It is worth remarking that in her insistence on a desire for self-abnegation, the mother cannot fail to repeatedly assert her significance as a subject in the face of the father (I/me are repeated eight times in her protestation). It is Clare Aubrey who passes on the musical talents she was prevented from realising to her daughters, as well as a faith in love and continuity, only attained by 'working perpetually'. For Rose, her mother, after her death fills the absence, the space in her life: 'my mother was huge across the skies, the peaceful fields, the peaceful waters were her footstool' (CR, 215).

Thus from a perspective where the position of the father is idolised at the same time as being recognised as a dubious power, the idea and role of the mother, as a sign defined in relation to its difference from that of the father, will be confused. The question of what a mother is *supposed* to be is an issue tackled in *The Judge* by the counterpointing of two characters who are mothers - comparable in terms of their dissatisfying and difficult lives, and by the fact that both stand for, from the daughter's position, in Adrienne Rich's words: 'the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the

martyr'.²³ Mrs Melville, 'like some brown bird' (J,76), is a widow, whom her daughter Ellen, in reaction to what she perceives as the 'tragic tyranny' (J,242) of Marion, finally comes to regard as 'how a mother ought to be, little, sweet and moderate' (J,393). The position of Marion, by contrast, does not allow for easy fixing as sign: she cannot be defined as a 'wife'; the conventional label of 'mother' also sits uneasily (unconventionally).

Early in the narrative Ellen is angered by the memory of her mother's submissiveness to her father. 'How dare her father condemn her mother so? Her mother was not a fool. That she was quite submissive to life, that it was unthinkable that she could rebel against society or persons, was not because she was foolish but because she was sweet. To question a law would be to cast imputations against those who made it, and that was a grave responsibility' (J,194). That she did not demonstrate her power publicly meant that Mrs Melville died good, but according to Ellen, unhappy. And yet Ellen compares her mother favourably to Marion, for the former's quiet, undramatic bearing. Perceiving Mrs Melville as an anchor of security, Ellen strips her mother of her position as a subjective and desiring being: 'With mother one knew exactly where one was; one knew everything that had happened to her, and how she had felt about it, and there was no question of anything fresh ever happening to her' (J,204). Mrs Melville is ineffectual in a visible, dramatic sense, perhaps, but 'she had that real wildness which her husband had aped, for she was a true romantic. She had scorned the plain world where they talked prose more expensively than most professed romantics do' (J,194). Mrs Melville exercises a power that has nothing to do with possession, domination; she has a passion for

'unpossessable things' (J,195), and offers the gift of empathy to those with whom she comes into contact. Is her expression of power to be condemned as dangerously (sacrificially) submissive or to be celebrated as subversive - because it refuses to play the games demanded by a patriarchal culture based on ruthless expediency?²⁴ She had, however, we are told, tried to bring up Ellen to enter into that culture's game, as a result of her own experience and the feelings of regret it had brought: 'she had learned to expect contradiction and *disregard* as the habitual response to all her remarks, and at the back of that a terror, far more dignified than the protest to which it gave birth, at the dreadful things she knew would happen because she was *disregarded*, and a small, weak, guilty sense that she had not made her protest loudly and, perhaps, cleverly enough' (my italics, J,78). The silence and lack of guile mean that she takes only a minor part on the stage.

While Ellen is angered by the misery her mother has suffered, she is unnerved by Marion, who appears to contradict the comforting sign of mother which has meaning for the daughter. Shortly after meeting Marion, Ellen makes an assessment of her. 'There was a tormenting incongruity about this woman: those laquered nails shown on hands that were broad and strong like a man's; and the head that rose from the specifically dark fur was massive and vigilant and serene, like the head of a great man (J,204). As 'a great man', in possession of a power incongruous with a mother's conventional image, Marion is Ellen's competitor; the narrator later comments that they might be 'friends in eternity' but are 'enemies in time' (J,227).

Marion's part in the plot comes to dominate Ellen's and Richard's story, and yet this is, of course, a plot written by the father where the mother comes to be fatalistic, resigned. Marion is said to believe that 'woman's only justification for existence is motherhood' (J,254), after the horrors which beset all other areas of her life. She also expresses as a fact of life the idea that women 'are dependent on their weak frames and their personal relationships' (J,239). Raped by her (nominal) husband, Marion's experience epitomises the vulnerability and powerlessness of women generally whose dependency offers a heavily compromised security. The nonsense of the legitimate/illegitimate opposition is exposed by the act of brutal rape to which Marion is subjected by Peacey. As his wife, Marion would have no legal case to fight against him; by marrying Marion, to alleviate the social stigma of her status as an unmarried mother, Peacey's violent abuse of her is quite legitimate.

In a society where women's position is severely circumscribed, checked by law, convention and public morality, the myth of total fulfilment is constituted in the form of the legitimised male/female relationship. Marion thus turns to Richard - her son/lover - for her pleasure and satisfaction. The words used to express her reminiscing of nursing Richard as a baby impress on her belief in and desire for 'that perfect relationship'. She is described as being 'enraptured' by the look of his body. Her love for him is so strong that she 'longed to clasp him, to crush him as she knew she must not'. The idea of force suggests the impulse of her desire as potentially destructive as well as protective. As she breastfeeds Richard, 'they were fused, they were utterly content with each other'. Marion dreads their separation: 'she would feel utterly desolate and hungry when she

could no longer join him to her bosom'. The narrative declares that the demands of her creative body can only be satisfied by 'the unborn or the nursling' (J,285-86). Here the mother's total dependence on the child for the satisfaction of her needs and desires is the effect of her deprivation as a subjective being in the patriarchal order.

The eponymous character of the *Sunflower* narrative focuses on the position of motherhood as a locus of potential freedom and power. From the position of Sunflower, motherhood and the maternal are significant both in relation to the symbolic order (the mother in the narrative, the maternal in culture,) and in striving for the imaginary (the pre-cultural maternal, which disrupts the narrative) and thus serves as both literalism and figuration. Memories of her mother's life, and sequences involving Alice Hestor, define the realities of the oppressed lives of mothers. In an Imaginary sense, by contrast, motherhood and the maternal signify the release of repression, the liberating of the libido and subjective desire.²⁵ Julia Kristeva looks forward to a utopian future for motherhood, where a woman enters

the labyrinths of an experience that, without the child, she would only rarely encounter: love for an other. Not for herself, not for an identical being, and still less for another person with whom 'I' fuse (love or sexual passion). But the slow, difficult and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself. The ability to succeed in this path without masochism and without annihilating one's affective, intellectual and professional

personality - such would seem to be the stakes to be won through guiltless maternity. It then becomes a creation in the strong sense of the term. For this moment, utopian? ²⁶

It is indeed difficult to imagine such an equilibrium; Sunflower does not. Absolved from the demands of performance, according to Sunflower, a mother would be able to enjoy peace in retreat from the public stage:

That must be lovely. One would not *have to* keep worrying about trying to *make* oneself cleverer because one was doing what was recognised as a whole time job ... There would not be that awful feeling of *having to* keep up to scratch, of *having to* win approbation that would be coldly withheld if one's performance was not good enough. (my italics, S, 9).

The powers of the maternal creative drive and the process of continuity which it ensures also attract Sunflower: 'I suppose nothing can really hurt one if you've got lots of children and know that everything will go on...', rather than coming to an (unhappy) end. At this thought she is 'lost in an impregnable kingdom of satisfaction' (S, 63). Her dream of a quasi-earth-motherhood locates the maternal outside the realm of the public world altogether, since Sunflower has no sense that she can be in control of her own (personal/social) performance. An imaginary mother only, however, Sunflower's position as a single woman remains socially precarious.

The economic, material position of mothers in society (Sunflower's mother, Alice Hestor) is shown to be greatly at variance with Sunflower's conception. Motherhood in history occupies a position of subordination, sacrifice and compromise. In 'Woman as Artist and Thinker' West describes the double-bind in which women are caught: as '[having] been forced and urged to have children; they have been punished for having children'. And, repeating an image which also recurs through the Sunflower narrative, she talks of how a woman must feel like 'a trapped rat, shut into an unjust universe'.²⁷ Nevertheless, her fictional texts do impress on the power of maternal love as a metaphor of a potentially strong, energizing relationship and future. For example, in the moments before Mrs Melville's death in *The Judge*, Ellen sits holding her hand:

In these moments the forgotten wisdom of the body, freed from the tyranny of the mind and its continual running hither and thither at the call of speculation, told them consoling things. The mother's flesh, touching the daughter's remembered a faint pulse felt long ago and marvelled at this splendid sequel and lost fear. Since the past held such a miracle the future mattered nothing. Existence had justified itself. The watchers were surprised to hear her sigh of rapture. The daughter's flesh, touching the mother's, remembered life in the womb, that loving organ that by day and night does not cease to embrace its beloved, and was the stronger for tasting again that first best

draught of love that the spirit has not yet excelled.

(J, 185)

The passage demonstrates a disruption of the symbolic order by graphically imaging the semiotic relation between mother and child, the release of a desire for the mutually reflective and empowering love of pre-Oedipal history. Remembering a non-hierarchical connection, the possibility of a different familial relation is asserted.

Mothers, fathers and children have their roles circumscribed, determined by paternal authority which, because of its real as well as figurative power, is also often regarded with a confusion of awe and resentment. Strict codes of conventional behaviour depending on sex determine gender roles constituting a relationship of opposition between men and women. West writes of a generation of women who reject the legacy of their fathers but are still subject to their influence both inside and outside the home. They regard their mothers' submissiveness as defeatist, but in the light of their own emotional experience and, still lacking social (and possibly also economic) support structures, the daughters can empathise with their position, and in fear of rejection and ostracism maintain the (semblance of the) pattern. Most importantly, West's fiction confronts the dilemma so succinctly summarised by Nancy K. Miller, where 'as in so much women's fiction a world outside love proves to be out of the world altogether'.²⁸

Desiring authority, master and slave

Given the pervasive influence of the fantasied, ideal family, members are pressured into performing the traditional patriarchal game. As long as the collusion of both parties continues, the domination of one sex by another persists. The familiar story is no less pertinent today, even while women have made significant advances in educational, professional and economic terms. There is still a powerfully marked ideological and hierarchical division between the public (qua male) and domestic (qua female) sphere.

The conventional drama of our lives is the source of both our power (potential for effective action) and our imprisonment (action delimited by circumstance, convention and expectation). For women particularly, the pressures of having to conform to types, roles, written by and for the benefit of others (the male directors, who wield the major share of political, economic, psychological and media control) create a crisis of female subjectivity with which West's fiction is significantly preoccupied. (The next chapter will focus specifically on this question as it affects female identity.) The male / female relation in many ways comes to resemble a master/slave dualism (a relationship of binary opposition) which is constructed and maintained through a pattern of hegemony: a relationship directed by the man and sustained by the woman in her practice of self-sacrifice. For West the oppressed are often as culpable as the oppressors. She often criticised the attitude of self-sacrifice in familial and sexual relations as inevitably dehumanising.

The basis of the anti-feminist position is the idea that women ought to sacrifice the development of their own

personalities for the sake of men and children ... If half the individuals agree to remain weak and undeveloped half the race is weak and undeveloped. And if every alternate link of a chain is weak it matters not how strong the others are: the chain will break all the same. Every nation that has contained a slave class has fallen to dust and ashes in spite of all its military glories and its pride of brains. And I cannot remember that any individual has ever benefited the race by self-sacrifice.²⁹

Despite her condescendingly flippant comment about Simone de Beauvoir - 'It is only after one has read *The Second Sex* and *Old Age* that one sees what a lot there is in Marjorie Proops'³⁰ - West, together with other feminists, is indebted to the French writer for her detailed and extensive elucidation of the relations between men and women.³¹ De Beauvoir exposes that relation as being based on gender domination, a hierarchised duality of masculine and feminine, subject and object, culture and nature, autonomy and dependency, activity and passivity: the foundation of the respective positions of master and slave, as expounded by Hegel.

According to Hegel, the relationship between master and slave is set up as follows. An awareness of one's self is achieved through recognition by another self. To be certain and in control of oneself, however, one must negate the other: each subject aims at the destruction of the other, through a life and death struggle. Only by risking life, argues Hegel, does one become aware of oneself as a free individual. But if the

struggle were to end in death, the other on whom each subject depends for recognition would be destroyed. Thus recognition is only possible if one subject submits to the other. In this way the master/slave relation is constituted. In Hegel's words, 'the one is independent and its essential nature is to be for itself; the other is dependent, and its essence is life or existence for another. The former is the Master or Lord, the latter the Bondsman'.³² This notional pattern of combative and hierarchical oppositionality has recognisable links with the history of male / female relations, and with women being defined against the phallographic associations of men's authority, as considered in the first chapter. In order to challenge the pattern, feminism must reject this hierarchy which depends on the refusal of otherness to ensure the illusory totality of its own self-assertion. As Jessica Benjamin urges, 'to halt this cycle of domination ... the other must make a difference. This means that women must claim their subjectivity and so be able to survive destruction'.³³ Perhaps West spoke so patronisingly of De Beauvoir's achievements because her own fiction had been wrangling with master and with slave for quite some time before *The Second Sex* came to be written in 1949.

For example, the reader can locate the witty deconstruction of the Hegelian dialectic in *Harriet Hume*. Arnold, as a public figure, a politician, maintains his hold on the sense of his own authority, his capacity for 'self-government' (HH, 115), only by distancing Harriet as Other. During one of their meetings, for example, 'He backed from her, halted and decided to make for the authoritative chair behind his desk, where he could look at her across the gear of his important business. He

sat back on the cushions and tried to swell a little, and thrust out his chin, so that he might stare at her under dropped lids' (HH,182).

Arnold's greatest source of perplexity is his awareness and admission that oppositions won't stand still, that the order on which he depends for his sense of authority and for his effective (dominating) power is restless and precarious. His 'opposite', Harriet, makes this evident through her powers of magic (she can put herself in his position, think his thoughts, articulate his desires). Arnold complains that 'if one's opposite starts playing tricks with the order of things, reading one's mind before one speaks it, making one see through closed doors, bringing to light those parts which should stay in darkness if one is not to fall to pieces with discomfiture, why all must come to chaos' (HH,241).

Arnold's perspective explains his desire to kill Harriet: for him she represents the adversary, the dissident in a social and public sense, as well as the non-rational enemy within himself, the unpredictable other who disturbs content.

In the text, the destruction of one also means the death of the other; oppositions are relatives, dependent on one another for meaning and existence. Arnold despairs because, 'nothing is more sure than that so long as one's opposite survives one will be liable to be plunged into conditions utterly contrary to one's being, which are an attack on one's essence; ay, which condemn one to death' (HH,229). Even though Harriet determines to maintain the status quo: 'I will not disturb the classic relationship of the sexes' (HH,37), the tone of a heightened comic irony renders precarious and dubious the claim to a justified polarity.

Arnold's view is described by the French theorist Hélène Cixous as typical of Western thought, which is caught up in an infinite pairing of binary oppositions. Cixous traces death as the necessary consequence of this process.

The movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense is the movement through which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time a war is let loose, death is always at work...

We see that 'victory' always comes down to the same thing: things get hierarchical.³⁴

At the novel's conclusion, Arnold reluctantly concedes that the universe consists of a 'confusion of substance' (HH,255). While he first views this state as one of 'unseemly chaos', of warring polarities, Harriet concedes that their relation is one of 'opposites', 'but surely there is no great harm. There is the North, and there is the South, and there is no war between them' (HH,203). A vast space, albeit of 'peaceful' opposition is nevertheless maintained.

The sense of the female subject's revulsion^{from} and fear of male physicality and sexuality is expressed in all the fictional texts, since male (sexual) desire is frequently represented as female (figurative) death. While this is treated comically in *Harriet Hume*, in *The Birds Fall Down* it becomes a threatening menace. Kamensky's sexual desire for and designs on Laura, are understood by her as his impulse to murder her. Through the confusion sex and death become coterminous. In addition, his

excitement at relating his 'friend's' project towards political meaning (climax) runs parallel to and is inextricable from his sexual excitement over Laura as he approaches (imagines) coition. Later, his pants of excitement coincide with Laura's deep breaths of fear, as she visualises his wishing that he could 'go on and on tearing her to pieces'; 'they were in horrid physical agreement' (BFD,346). Terms of sexual passion and physical destruction become interchangeable and pass comment on other relationships in the the text (notably Tania and Edward's). Laura perceives Kamensky as 'sitting quite still, in a tense dream of action like a cat before it springs, and on his lap his bandaged hand pointed towards her, as if under its pretended helplessness there was a weapon ready to discharge' (BFD,308). Kamensky's barely suppressed desire transmits itself to Laura as a threat to her life; the opposing impulses are confronted in an image of tense phallic power.

For Sunflower the master/slave relation is one on which her (death of) subjectivity depends. She fears to imagine a relationship which is non-hierarchical, where the masculine is not in the position of power over her. Sunflower resents being dominated, yet she cannot bear to contemplate an alternative. When relations between herself and Essington have deteriorated to the point where he strikes her (an action which Sunflower has predicted as the telos of their liaison), her reaction is worth remarking.

This was the most horrible thing that had ever happened to her, that can ever have happened to anybody since the world began. Not because he had hurt her, but because he had not.

He had not even made her sway on her feet. He was not as strong as she was. And that was shame, shame and ruin for them both.

She opened her eyes and saw that he was going to strike her again. He was raising his arm with a curious artificial movement, a trick to achieve strength, like the overarm stroke in swimming. Her heart bled with love for him, for she saw that he was trying to save the world for her. Since indeed everything she felt about life depended on men being in some ways stronger than women' (S, 233-234).³⁵

Their conflict of power comes to blows in an exhibition of masculine physical strength. Sunflower's self-alienation is so strong, that her love for him becomes his anger towards her; she focuses on Essington's pain rather than that he inflicts on her. She cannot accept such a conclusion where the role of the man, of the father figure is thus humiliated, leaving as it does its surviving subject in a sea of insecurity, confirming for her the meaninglessness of her (de)meaning which she had always, however covertly, distrusted. The freeze-frame effect produced in the passage above is significant, too, I think: motion is arrested, the telos deferred in fear of the violent truth (about women's potential power) it uncovers, a truthful violence. Kristeva comments that 'sacrifice orders violence, binds it, tames it';³⁶ Essington spoils Sunflower's sacrifice by failing to 'save the world for her'. The irony is poignant.

Richard Yaverland in *The Judge* is at first shown consciously to reject the traditional male/female relationship. He remembers with distaste his former lover, a Catholic, Mariquita: 'She had never been his comrade. she had thought of him as an external power, like the Church, who told her to do things, and in the end the choice had been for her not between a dear and pitied lover and a creed but between two tyrants' (J,70). In oxymoronic fashion, Richard is cast as the helpless despot. With Ellen he believes he can find the compatibility of an equal. Yet the terms which express his love for her carry echoes of past experience. He feels 'immense' with 'victory', and 'there was a steely quality about his love that would have been more appropriate to some vindictive purpose' (J,100).

Ellen feelings about Richard are similarly ambivalent, at first. The narrator's ironic rendering of Ellen's production of fantasy romances in which she imagines Richard ('tall and royal') on imperialistic adventures, where he conquers islands, and pirates, and 'brown' natives (J,58), textualises not only the conventional oppositions between them, but also illustrates the cultural and political frame within which their personal relationship will develop. The reverence and faith which for her almost inevitably accompany her regard for what she perceives as an authority - in this instance Richard himself - are qualified by feelings of dread at becoming involved with him and hatred of his power. 'She knew that no argument could alter the fixed opinion that Yaverland's kingly progress through the world, which a short time ago she had watched with such a singing of the veins as she knew when she saw

lightning, was an insult to her lesser height, her contemned sex, her obscurity. The chaos in herself amazed her (J,133).

Ellen 'thought herself a wonderful new sort of woman who was going to be just like a man' (J,44). The attempt to imitate or resemble is symptomatic of the struggle to overcome the sense of otherness which, in social terms, means subordination or exclusion (the slave defined by the master class). In the text, the female's shift from subject to object is paralleled by the foregrounding of Ellen's sexuality and desire. As her feelings for Richard grow stronger, so does her fear of relinquishing her own freedom and power. 'She was not sure that she approved of love. The position of women being what it was'. The apparent rationality about emotion is not so ironic. The nature of love is *indeed* dependent on the 'position' from which it is given/received: it *is* an issue of power. In addition, the use of free indirect speech here produces an ambiguity of meaning: 'was' can signify past or present. The effect is to underline the instability of any position and to point to the tension, the possible difference and distance between the narrator's and the character's perspective. Ellen remembers that married women 'never seemed to go out on long walks in the hills or to write poetry': a dearth of creative freedom. At this thought she pushes Richard away from her, but his hunger for her is predatory, 'wolfish' (J,156). What ensues merits quoting at length.

He was going to kiss her. But this she could not bear. She loved to lay her hand on the blue shadowed side of marble, she loved to see gleaming blocks of ice going through the

streets in lorries, she loved the wind as it blows in the face of the traveller as he breasts the pass, she loved swift running and all austerity; and she had confused intimations that this he wanted to do would in some deep way make war on these preferences. 'Ah, no!' she whimpered. 'I have told you that I love you. Why need you touch me? I can love you without touching you. Please ... please...'

Oh, if he wanted it he must have it. As she let her head fall back on her throat it came to her that though she had not known that she had ever thought of love, although she would have sworn that she had never thought of anything but getting on, there had been many nights when, between sleeping and waking, she had dreamed of this moment. It was going to be (his deep slow breath, gentle with amorousness, assured her) as she had then prefigured it; romantic as music heard across moonlit water, as a deep voice speaking Shakespeare, as rich colours spilt on marble when the sun sets behind cathedral windows: but warm as summer, soft as the south wind...

But this was pain. How could he call by the name of delight this hard, interminable, sucking pressure when it sent agony downwards from her mouth to the furthest cell of her body, changing her bones so that ever after they would be more brittle, her flesh so that it would be more subject to bruises! She did not suspect him of cruelty, for his arms

still held her kindly, but her eyes filled with tears at the strangeness, which she felt would somehow work out to her disadvantage, of the world where people held wine and kisses to be pleasant things. Yet when the long kiss came to an end she was glad that he set another on her lips, for she had heard his deep sigh of delight. She would always let him kiss her as much as he liked, although she could not quite see what pleasure he found in it. (J, 156-57)

'Touching' Richard means sacrificing her own pleasure, losing touch with herself (the text losing touch with a broader landscape). The powerful and pervasive cultural myth of the literary romance - the masculine parenthesis whose assurance, 'gentle with amorousness', holds the woman's (in)security - means that Ellen had often 'dreamed of this moment' unconsciously. And yet the disjunction between romance trailing off - 'warm as summer, soft as the south wind...' - and reality - 'But this was pain.' - is severe. It is only a few lines below the passage quoted, that Ellen equates Richard's (dominating) dependence ('as if he were a little helpless thing') with that of a baby. (Marion, we recall, felt her son was her lover; Ellen feels her lover become her son). This offers Ellen the opportunity to enter the romance with 'grandiose convictions of new power' - her role is to play the (powerful?) sacrifice to Richard's hero: 'There was no sea, however black with chill and depth, in which she would not dive to save him, no desert whose unwatered sands she would not travel if so she served his need'. And as Ellen's love makes her 'adore him with her skin as she had always adored him with her heart'; she loses her body, 'sank confused into the warm

darkness of his embrace', dissolves, and becomes Richard's solution: 'Ellen ... you are the answer ... to everything ...' (J,157-58). The confusion between the distancing irony and apparent luxuriating pleasure of tone through which the passage is narrated, is a further indication of the absorbing 'logic' of the hierarchy of love, a loving hierarchy, which persuades women to fall for it.

Marriage rites

The function of marriage as a literary device in West's texts can no longer perform the comfortable reconciliatory function it does in nineteenth century fiction. The sentiment expressed by Imogen in Rose Macaulay's novel of 1923, *Tale Told by an Idiot*, 'I want to do nice things myself, not to marry people who do them',³⁷ marks the shifting demands being made by twentieth century women on their personal relationships, which is projected in the fictional treatment of the marriage convention. In West's fiction, the issue of marriage becomes the daughter's articulated struggle against sacrifice.

Marriage offers respectability for women; it has traditionally provided them with a degree of social regard in the name of their male partners. In *The Thinking Reed*, Marc comments that 'all women should be married'. Isabelle agrees: 'there is no other way of living for a woman' (TR,180). In the given socio-historical context, no other way would afford a woman respectability, acceptability, as we see in the patronising presentation of the 'pathetic' Luba, the Russian spinster, in that text (TR,159). Trained by the use of her mind to distance 'rationality' from her body's

impulse (another rationality), deprived of her unborn child, Isabelle finds her comfort and social security by reforging her ties with Marc.

The ritual of marriage allows the public voice of the woman to be heard, but the label, wife, admitted West, in her *Family Memories*, 'suggests a stability ... not guaranteed'.³⁸ Marriage is a means of regulating and organising attitudes to sexuality. Whether it is treated as a social unit where differences are dissolved in the name of the father, or as a site of ongoing dialogue between two individuals, the tenets of patriarchy are nevertheless, at least implicitly, sustained.³⁹ For those characters involved in extra-marital affairs, the term mistress 'suggests a gaiety not at all relevant' either.⁴⁰ West generally writes in sympathy, even empathy with these positions. Susie Staunton in *The Birds Fall Down*, however, takes on the role of the dark other, the adulteress, the disturber of marital unity. 'Looking at Susie ... what did one see? One had to look again and never was sure. Everything about this woman was unexpected' (*BFD*, 39). Thomas Docherty, in his examination of the arena of authority makes the link effectively:

These novels which ... propose the family as socially normative, use that family as guarantor of stable identity for a character: these fictions are about the discovery of a fathering, naming source or origin. The problem of the adulterous relation threatens, on the other hand, to undermine this; and often the adultery is the province of the female character. This is perhaps apt, for it is she who most radically lacks an autonomous identity in the socio-

cultural ideology of proprietorial marriage, and she, also, who lacks the authority which goes with such identity.⁴¹

The adulteress is the symbol of the split that fissures the representation of marriage as unity, through *movement* towards the other - *ad alter* - a movement which shakes the foundational notion of an authoritative institution. (Sunflower, and also Margaret in *The Return of the Soldier*, by their treatment as 'legitimate', central subjects in their respective texts, counter that claim to authoritativeness.) By contrast, Susie signifies the subject not at one with herself (or with her other half, her husband), who has moved out of her proper place. Any open condemnation of Edward Rowan's, Arnold Condox's, Piers Aubrey's or Essington's transgressive *movement* is conspicuous by its discreet absence.

Challenges to the traditional institution of marriage are made in different ways in the fictional texts. Ellen, in *The Judge*, is given to dream of an impossible wedding, to oppose the traditional and public ritual in which she will take part.

Of course she wanted to be married, because, whatever the marriage laws were like, there was no other way by which she and Richard could tell everybody what they were to each other. But she had wanted the ceremony as secret as possible, as little overlooked by any other human being, and she fancifully desired it to take place in some high mountain chapel where there was no congregation but casqued

marble men and the faith professed was so mystical that the priest was as inhuman as a prayer. Thus their vows would, though recorded, have the sweet quality of unwritten melodies that are sung only for the beloved who has inspired them. But now this marriage was to be performed with the extremest publicity before a crowd of issues if not of persons. It was to be a subordinate episode in a pageant the plot of which she did not know' (J,223).

Since the human world Ellen perceives is a divisive one, the mystical one is preferable. Here there is no audience, no other which makes a subject an object, and indeed, where the subjects themselves are unseen. Luce Irigaray perceives mystical discourse as 'the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly'.⁴² The 'priest' the 'faith', and the 'prayer' have obviously theological connotations, however. Does the 'prayer' express the path through the 'priest' to the 'faith' of the father? Or does the elusive insubstantiality of the image articulate a desire (characteristic of the Romantic tradition) to transcend the divisive symptoms of the symbolic world? The paradoxes which constitute Ellen's desire certainly seem to support the latter view: a congregation that is not one, an inhuman priest, recorded yet unwritten vows. Ellen bitterly resents the fact that their marriage is to be reduced to the status of a public performance, the meaning(lessness) of which baffles her.

In *Cousin Rosamund: A Saga of the Century* the meaning of marriage is gradually transformed from being a ritual of sacrifice to an affirmation

or statement of self-assertion, as well as of creativity and love. Rose, the child, in *The Fountain Overflows*, imagines married women such as her mother as caged in a zoo, asking the 'attendant' for permission to allow her to fetch her daughter in. The woman is bound to show courtesy to the 'attendant in charge of the gate' (FO,113), to claim her rights as a mother. Later in that same text Clare Aubrey expresses doubts about her daughters' potential for marriageability, because the family was 'not part of any world' (FO,117). Rose and Mary feel alienated from many of the men with whom they come into contact as young adults. As women they are objects of suspicion and fear because, independent professionals, they owe their positions not to a background of paternal wealth and privilege, but to their own talents. At the beginning of *This Real Night*, Rose perceives marriage as 'a descent into a crypt where, by the tremulous light of smoking torches, there was celebrated a glorious rite of a sacrificial nature. Of course it was beautiful, we saw that, but we meant to stay in the sunlight, and we knew no end which we could serve by offering ourselves as a sacrifice' (TRN,6). From the misery which marriage has cost their mother, Mary and Rose are determined not to make the same mistake. Marriage means going underground in Rose's view; in Ellen's dream it takes place on an elevated plane; it cannot satisfactorily take its place along the ground lines of the narrative.

However, towards the end of *Cousin Rosamund*, in (determined?) forgetfulness of her preceding narrative, marriage (to Oliver, who 'was not literal' (CR,278)) becomes for her a journey to the place of unity. She criticises literature's 'heavy broadside against marriage, which was regarded as so unsatisfactory an institution that a divorce was no

longer assumed to be a tragedy' (CR,252). Rose, as principal subject of her narrator's text, writes out (performs a rite of) the contradictory (in)significance of her own preceding (now depersonalised) 'literature'. Nevertheless, the *Saga's* eponymous character's flesh is 'disgraced' (CR,69) according to Rose, through her disastrous marriage to a Greek business tycoon. At her wedding party, her unity is shattered for Rose by the 'six Rosamunds' (CR,68) reflected in the looking glass. While West had prepared for Rosamund's later life her 'redemption', this marriage in the extant text, remains broken.

The personal is political, ideological, economic

The drama of the family dynamic and the complex of relationships which was examined above, particularly between men and women, to which it gives rise outside the immediate familial network, is consistently modified and reciprocally affected by the processes of wider contexts: social, economic, cultural, political and ideological. While West's texts focus predominantly on women in the performance of personal and domestic dramas, this realm is always foregrounded as the other side, the extension and contradiction of the public arenas of authority and power; always, however, as in some kind of relation to them. In the texts, observations on political, economic, industrial and social machinations, which inform the backdrops of the narratives are made, as it were, from a distance - either through the (first or third person) perspective of women, who because they are women, are positioned in the (public) margins, or through a masculine vision, filtered through a third person (generally ironic) narrative voice. But because the

feminine marginal or ironic voice is so closely aligned with that of the narrator, it enjoys a position which challenges (sometimes inadvertently) the very notion of the particular 'centre' to which it looks. Perceived from a distance, the centres are produced as alienated and alienating, and as artificial, unreal, but paradoxically, nonetheless disturbingly powerful in their real influence. In the first chapter, the tenuous hold on authority which the letter(s) of the text, of the narrative, and of their resultant ideology maintain was examined. The patterned coherence they are thus empowered to exhibit makes them resistant but not invulnerable to criticism or deconstruction. The structures which construct and maintain personal, social, economic and institutional authority to become the patriarchal patterned forms informing West's narratives demand comparable rereading.

In the sections below then, a consideration of West's treatment of a masculinist ideology and a public economy in a historical context will be combined with an examination of their links with a private and personal sphere. In the fictional texts, whether the women are involved with men who are prominent public figures (Sunflower, Harriet Hume, Isabelle Tarry, Lulah Hartley, Lily, Tania Rowan) or even with those less famous on the social stage, the public life of the men always has repercussions for the (private) life of the women.

'Great men' is a term used with a tone of ironic reverence in West's fiction, to designate the figures of politicians, industrialists and the

like, who are alternately satirised (for their pretensions to self-assurance) and perceived sympathetically (for their failure to meet the excessive demands of their role). In her notes on the theme of *Sunflower*, West wrote that 'the type of civilisation that men have produced demands great men - greatness that presses too hardly on the men. They are bound to buckle under the strain'; the strain of an impossible, masterful absolute.⁴³

Sunflower maintains the ambivalent attitude of her narrator to their position. At one point, watching a judge friend of hers as he sits on a court session, *Sunflower* muses: 'these great men, they hurt themselves so by being great' (S,27). And the narrative demonstrates how they hurt others too. The great Essington is childishly dependent on *Sunflower*, as well as treating her cruelly, dominating her to compensate for the way he feels himself to have failed as an effective politician.⁴⁴ From *Sunflower*'s perspective: 'That was the fault of his greatness; it was because he had to roll in such fierce grips with his times in his efforts to dominate them. It was the fault of his greatness too that he minded it all so much. He could not take anything easily because the knowledge of his power and his responsibility pulled his head stiff and high like an invisible bearing rein' (S,50).

The burden of authority costs dear and produces Essington as an 'edited kind of man' (S,5). And yet his obstinate faith in 'the stern moral passion of our sex' (S,56), makes him a target of scorn. *Sunflower* thinks, 'it was funny the way that men have special ways of being ridiculous that they agree not to consider ridiculous, like the silly

clothes they wear at Eton, and going to cricket matches as if they mattered' (S,57).

Similarly ridiculed by the narrative voice for his pretensions to integrity, dignity and honour, Arnold Condorex in Harriet Hume is also taken seriously as a figure who wields effective (if dubious) power. The more emphatically Arnold asserts himself as a controlled individual, the more suspicious his behaviour and practice in the political world is shown to become. An adept 'negotiator' (HH,123), Arnold becomes skilled at tampering with even geographical realities ('Let Pondh be Mondh' (HH,71)), at political conspiracy, and at financial dishonesty. His authoritative persona is set up and then undermined by comparing him to his Greek and Roman forebears. Jacques Barzun, in a study of the classical temper, makes a comment which quite aptly sums up Arnold's own predicament: 'the classical hierarchy maintains an unruffled front behind which all the fighting passions go on just as usual'.⁴⁵

The reader is several times reminded that Arnold reaches a position of political prominence due to his skills as a negotiator. By making a concerted effort at self-constraint, Arnold assures (at least temporarily) his public respectability, his skills as an actor. (Similarly, Clare Aubrey, in *The Fountain Overflows*, sustains the public respectability of her husband by her own negotiating skills.)

The 'great men' in West's fiction form part of that race of men whom she describes in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* as finding it 'difficult to live without the help of philosophical systems which far outrun ascertained

facts'.⁴⁶ In *The Birds Fall Down*, Laura's perspective ironises those who obsessively claim to live exclusively by the rules of a political ideology. Though fond of the revolutionary, Chubinov, for example, she believes his politics to be 'the game he happened to enjoy. It was his kind of fun. There was no more to his revolutionary passion than that' (BFD, 420).⁴⁷ There is a powerful argument to be made for the necessity of a revolutionary challenge to oppressive systems of rule which the text does acknowledge, at the same time as it questions its murderous impulse. Nevertheless, a biting critique of political (notably Hegelian) ideologies is made when they are treated as abstract principles, lacking engagement with human practice and experience, and when their exponents claim their absolute authority, rightness; finally, for all their apparent neutrality, the spokesmen for these ideologies claim a rationality, and a universality which is made dubious by its apparently masculine, exclusive self-assurance. Hegel's phallogentric wisdom in *The Philosophy of Right* puts women in their place and furnishes the context for a reading of his ideology as it is reproduced in *The Birds Fall Down*.

Women may be capable of education, but they are not made for the more advanced sciences, for philosophy and certain forms of artistic production which require universality ... When women hold the helm of government, the State is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions. Women are educated - who knows how? as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring

knowledge, while man attains his position only by the conquest of thought and by much technical exertion.⁴⁸

Three character perspectives: Nikolai's, Chubinov's, and Kamensky's - are offered as representatives or symbols of ideals. Since Hegelian philosophy is fundamental to the models they embrace, their function in the pattern is quite obviously schematised, where their combined views comprise the ironic absurdity of the *total* philosophical idea. (There are obvious links here with Hegel's master and slave, domination and submission relation examined above.)

As a tsarist and devout member of the Russian Orthodox church, Nikolai represents the status quo, the thesis. In the position of antithesis, Chubinov, the socialist revolutionary, opposes tsarism and seeks to overthrow the imperialist state. Kamensky, the double agent, imagines himself as the process through which the reaction between thesis and antithesis achieves the essence of the new life to which their mutual negation gives birth. Each of the characters postulates Kant and Hegel's as the philosophies which direct their course through life, and each reads the ideologies in his own way. In conversation with Chubinov, Nikolai says of these philosophers, 'you have misread them. They prove our case not yours' . Chubinov replies: 'Yes they can be read both ways ... But one way is wrong and one is right. Ours is the right way' (BFD, 108). Nikolai's perspective demonstrates authority as fixed, as a one-way directive; Chubinov's position concedes the possibility of alternatives, of a two-way, dialectical relationship. The contradictory interpretations to which the characters adamantly adhere demonstrate the

narrative interest in the changing face of meaning according to subject position. Laura remarks that 'both [Nikolai and Chubinov] had found in [Hegel's] works the messages they wanted, though they must have been very different' (BFD,300).

Nikolai Diakonov, a former tsarist minister, who claims to represent 'lawful authority' (BFD,97), is presented as both physically and mentally out of date. Chubinov's reference to him as 'a work of art' (BFD,88), is not simply a compliment to his stature, but a criticism of his fidelity to a sterile conservatism. Laura compares his former sense of self-importance with his attitude in the present context of his exile, where he appears as someone of 'a different species and one generally supposed to be extinct' (BFD,41). His awkward movements betray his age and suggest both his physical and spiritual displacement, for they are 'strange as signals to another star' (BFD,13). There are echoes here of T.S.Eliot's 'Hollow Men', where

... the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.⁴⁹

Nikolai's unquestioning faith in his leader (whom he regards as both saint and martyr) is undermined by the way Chubinov describes him as 'mean, evasive, grotesquely careless of his country and his own honour' (BFD,96).

Church and state mirror a common pattern of hierarchy. The religious patriarchy which Nikolai extols, reflects his confidence in the possibility of a perfect relationship with God, so that for him life finally becomes a pale imitation of that superior reality.⁵⁰ Through the inflexibility of his vision, focusing on an after life (trust in the security of the not-yet present) Nikolai maps his teleological course to death. Shortly before he dies, he regrets that the tsarist government and the religious code by which it is regulated is 'insufficiently rigid' (*BFD*, 254), since choice only leads to sin, and necessarily involves change. Nikolai is proud of being responsible for briefly closing down schools for women doctors in Russia. In addition, he remembers with admiration a friend who had temporarily succeeded in banning lectures in philosophy at Russian universities, declaring it unnecessary to make speculations about the creator, since 'the revelations we have been given on divine authority are sufficient' (*BFD*, 42).

The alternative system to which Chubinov devotes himself is described in terms highly connotative of the Christian faith it claims to oppose.⁵¹ Chubinov imagines himself as a Christ figure - 'I feel it is my duty to live until I've discovered the truth and proclaimed it' (*BFD*, 177) - who must take on the burden of sin, sacrificing his own innocence in the name of his cause by ridding it of such corrupting influences as Kamensky. It is, though, his wife's life which is sacrificed. As Chubinov talks of the 'sacred idea of revolution', he mourns the death of his 'sainted' wife whose 'unremitting labours' (*BFD*, 196) carried out on behalf of the cause finally killed her.

In his role as double agent, Kamensky takes his colour according to others' colours: as he moves between thesis and antithesis, he represents the reversal of the phallic. In his synthesis, the (false) sign of consummate power is exploded into nothingness, Kamensky's faith in his own self-refinement is taken to its 'logical' end: the revelation of ultimate phallic emptiness.⁵² Marshall Berman, in his discussion of Azeff (the double agent on whom Kamensky was modelled), regards him as typical of modern revolutionaries, whose nihilism 'is a pale shadow of the nihilism of the forces of Order'.⁵³ The difference between the two extremes of absolute and nothingness comes to be negligible.

The texts which are specifically concerned with the industrial economy - The Thinking Reed and 'The Abiding Vision' - are both set around the time of the Wall Street crash of 1929. (A centre here is graphically shown to self-combust). The crash is a metaphor for the symbolically powerful, manipulative, paternal sign (the stock market) which disguises an absence, and in which many people place their faith (money) and lodge their notion of (financial) security. The conspicuousness of wealth preserves the illusion of meaning through its materiality. In an essay written in 1933, West muses on the 'tragic spirit' of the age, and shows how material comforts cushion the painful awareness of her predicament: 'Wrapping yourself in rich clothes as if to say, "there's nothing but you really, the universe is just a figment you keep creating, if I give you all these lovely presents will you make me a lovelier universe?"'.⁵⁴

We might compare her words to those of Brecht, more sharply ironised, in his 'Song of the Invigorating Effect of Money'.

Upon this earth we hear dispraise of money
Yet, without it, earth is very cold
And it can be warm and friendly
Suddenly through the power of gold.⁵⁵

Similarly, *The Modern 'Rake's Progress'* (1934), West's witty sketch of the yuppies of the 1930s, traces the (mis)fortunes of the slaves who pamper themselves with the hollow glitz their capital can buy, against the ever looming background of the Depression.

In 'The Abiding Vision', while the industrial and economic contexts determine the fate of the story's characters, and are acknowledged as indisputably powerful, the fictiveness of their authority is nonetheless marked. Readers learn of the early morning 'desolation' which Sam frequently experiences, when it 'seemed to him that the business he had done all his life, the foundation of the Mount Couzens Corporation and its eleven subsidiaries, had no reality at all' (AV,191).

The protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism are viewed as complementary forces. Thus, the 'journey' (AV,189) to success undertaken by Lulah and Sam has connotations of a spiritual quest or crusade in which a 'campaign' (AV,190) is fought and briefly won by the couple, who enjoy godlike status before they lose. With regret, Sam realises that though he and his partner, Jim, 'had travelled far, they had never come

near the holy cities of finance, whose treasure is beyond the reach of thieves, because there is so much of it' (AV,202). The illusory dream of contained fullness and contentment in possession remain tantalisingly out of reach.

We might link the pattern of the acquisition and losing of money which this narrative traces to the (sexually silent) illicit affair between Sam and Lily. Stephen Heath points out that a common Victorian term for the climax of sexual pleasure was 'to spend'.⁵⁶ Here, while Sam's shares are mounting in value, Lily (his 'mistress') is 'steadily increasing in beauty' (AV,198). As long as this trend continues he has no reason to grow dissatisfied with her. There is a loud silence about the affectionate, loving, or sexual side of their relationship. We read of the social events they enjoy together with various friends, but, 'that was about all there was to it' (AV,199). When Sam's world is in financial ruin, Lily assumes the maternal role previously performed by Lulah, his wife. Then, at the story's conclusion, when Sam's financial prospects look bright once more, Lily's lined face, arousing in him feelings of gratitude and pity, is incompatible with the sexual pleasure/beauty he will once more be able to afford. Lily, in these terms has been spent (her own spending powers are not mentioned).

Sam had first been attracted to Lily by what he perceives as her unsentimentality - indeed, his relish of the first stages of the affair is in part accounted for by its business-like efficiency. The development in Sam and Lily's relationship is marked in progress by the time and money spent. 'It took Sam a fortnight in time, and the

expenditure of many dollars at a Fifth Avenue jewellers, to become as intimate with Lily as he had intended' (AV,195). At this stage, one of Lily's most vital assets is her youth: her authority is her beauty: she was 'working on herself incessantly to that end, always experimenting with new creams and powders and rouges, and different ways of doing her hair and pencilling her eyebrows, and in their private hours she retained her power to make him feel young again and without doubts'. Lily's smooth unlined face provides Sam with a polished mirror surface that reflects the illusion of his age(lessness). Even socially, Lily appears to give very good value for money. 'When he took her on a party with any of his friends who liked that sort of thing she did him credit, for she got good value for the immense sums she spent on clothes' (AV,198). Showing off the woman confirms the masculine position of power. The fact that Lily is also domesticated - she cooks and keeps house admirably - makes for Sam an extra and unexpected advantage.

Stephen Heath summarises the relationship between sex and the economy: 'men spend, women have no sexual reality other than as the reflection and confirmation of this expenditure; they have their being in the expense of the man and their pleasure, if it exists, must be exactly equivalent to and determined by his'.⁵⁷ Lily is in for an ugly time, then when Sam begins to lose money on the stock market: as the symbol of the life he can afford, her value fluctuates. Trying to contact her on receiving the news of his impending financial disaster, and finding her not at home, Sam 'remembered bitterly that rats forsake a sinking ship'. Enraged, he goes on to imagine that when he goes to visit her, she will be

swathed in one of those negligées that dripped soft ostrich fronds round her slender ankles, over white her white hands and their vermillion nails, and at the thought of her body and the embrace they had often shared, which she would no doubt expect him to renew that evening, he felt as if his mouth were being crammed full with sticky sweetmeats. 'God, I'm going to tell that broad where she gets off'. (AV,203)

The 'good kid' (AV,198) is transformed into a 'broad'. Her moral value decreases as he reckons the amount he has spent on her as money he can ill afford to have wasted. But when he reaches her apartment, he finds that Lily is wearing a 'hard little black suit with a lingerie blouse, and instead of putting her arms round him she waved him to an arm-chair with her long cigarette holder, and poured him out a good strong highball' (AV,203). The costume in which Sam has dressed her in his mind's eye repeats and mimics the stereotyped prostitute's garb - the woman who tempts and seduces her victim to ruin. However Lily defies his positioning of her by choosing another outfit (substituting the role of the efficient master for that of the shrewd mistress). Lily takes (paternal) control, persuading Sam that it is time for him to relinquish his role as 'a great big tycoon' against which she plays 'on the end of a string as a little scottie ... "You've got to give up and let me do what I can for you. God I'm proud to do it"' (AV,219).⁵⁸

The image of rising and falling (escalating and crashing capital) is also a metaphor for the economy of (male) sexual pleasure (its ups and downs). Against this pattern the notion of active female pleasure is

markedly absent: Lulah and Lily both devote themselves to Sam's cause. Since any feminine power is obscured in the text, since the social structures, conventions and the economy are revealed as expendable and humanly debilitating, the reader can herself inscribe that power through identifying the misrecognition of Lily and Lulah by Sam. Lulah's part in the narrative is essentially non-verbal. During its latter half she is confined to a state of apparent senselessness. Alternatively, and more readily, I think, her collapse may be read as an act of rebellion against the position to which she has for so long conformed. As such, her inarticulacy is a positive gesture of refusal. By this means, Lulah's can be recuperated as a position of challenge. Lulah's (non)expression is an affirmative subversion of the limits of the narrative economy, and a display of dramatic economy: the withholding of performance.

In the early part of the narrative Lulah is shown to connive with Sam in his business game. We read initially of her movement up the social ladder as her husband's wealth swells. 'She had been someone in Chicago for quite a few years now. But before she had been someone in Chicago she had been someone in Omaha, and before that she had been nobody at all in Butte, Montana, and the journey had taken a long time and a great deal of faith' (AV, 189). Impotence is contained by a mask of importance. Lulah's belief in Sam and the significance of their positioning in the social arena have provided the fuel for her quest. Yet her commitment is not comfortable: the consolation which material comfort brings is disproportionate to its cost in terms of personal and individual needs. At one point Sam mentions to Lulah his awareness of her dislike of her

role in the 'social racket'. Her initial reaction to his words is telling: 'Her needles fell still, she covered her mouth. But she shook her head'. Lulah imposes silence on herself. Beginning to knit again (resuming her role as conniver) she comments to Sam, "'it's something we're in together". And flashing a young smile at him, she added, "Mind, I haven't done so badly out of it myself". She held up her latest diamond ring to him, and slipped it back on her finger. "And I've got you, Sam Hartley, for what you're worth"' (AV,201). The jargon of economics short changes on personal relationships.

In *The Thinking Reed*, Isabelle's reactions to her and Marc's class and the codes and systems they represent and maintain are similarly compromising. She despises the meaninglessness and the self-destructive impulse of its mechanism,⁵⁹ yet also believes that Marc needs his business as a 'discipline', using her faculty for rationality to justify his exploitation of his workers. More drastically, she sacrifices her child in order to save Marc's reputation and therefore his position of power in their society. Her 'civilising' mould acts to preserve the status quo, despite her recognition of its inherent nihilism.

As in 'The Abiding Vision', the wealth possessed by the industrial capitalists, the power they thereby wield, and the lives they lead, are posited in The Thinking Reed as both incredible fantasies which are the more formidable because they are tyrannous realities. The oppressive order which the 'tenacity of the system' (TR,148) imposes on its upholders and their (willing or unwilling) dependants, is criticised by the arbitrarily destructive effects of its functioning. The apparently

orderly industrial town over which Marc presides is organised as cement 'which had been hacked up into little cubes as separate dwellings and vast cubes as apartment houses' (TR,69), and belies the violent tension which exists between Marc and his employees. On a visit to the town where his factory is situated, Isabelle observes the women workers flooding out of the factory; they appear happy; laughing and waving at Marc. Yet Isabelle compares their relationship to that between the rulers and their slaves in the classical empires of the Greeks and Romans. 'They addressed Marc with hoarse cries as if they were rallying him on this new triumph of his potency, as if they were challenging him to turn this triumph into an orgy and embrace them all, and were threatening a jeering resistance so that he could thresh it all down, all in the sphere of fantasy but with the plangency of the intensest sort of daydream' (TR,76-77). His financial power is implicitly linked with the notion of a destructive masculine sexual power, claustrophobically confined by the terms of victory and defeat.

Isabelle is made aware that for all his air of childlike simplicity, Marc

was a worse slave driver than she had feared ... from youth he had strode through the twenty-four hours at the pace of a Marathon race, dragging with him in increasing numbers human beings who had not his bull neck, his thick veins, his ropy sinews. And none of them could leave him, being manacled to him by the fact that he was the employer and they were his employees, and the same fact was a gag which prevented them

from crying out and indicting him for lack of consideration.

(TR, 75-76)

The price which the employees must pay for the financial security that working at Marc's factory offers, cannot be separated from the personal security and social acceptability which Isabelle holds on to by staying with Marc. Her greatest sacrifice is the child which she miscarries to save Marc's business reputation, in a society which is itself described as 'a miscarriage' (TR, 327).

Women who circulate in the social market, even when financially independent, not only pay an emotional and psychological price, but come to have a price tag attached to themselves; they come to regard themselves as commodities; and other women as rival commodities. In West's texts there is generally only closeness between women of the same family; otherwise, relations between women are antagonistic and competitive. In *The Thinking Reed*, Isabelle muses that 'perhaps men, and the social structure which men have made, saw to it that women were worked till they dropped, so that there should be no force in them that was not expended in the service of their men' (TR, 133). In *The Return of the Soldier* the initial description of Kitty by Jenny (the first person narrator) is an obvious example: 'She looked so like a girl on a magazine cover that one expected to find a large "7d" somewhere attached to her person' (ROTS, 11). Through the narrative she is persistently satirised by Jenny for being the 'type' of woman who is 'obscurely aware that it is their civilising mission to flash the jewel of their beauty before all men, so that they shall desire it and work to get the wealth

to buy it' (*ROTS*,154). Luce Irigaray underlines the point (but as an attitude demanded of women not as what a certain 'type' decides to do). 'Participation in a society requires that the body submits itself to a specularisation, a speculation that transforms it into a value-bearing object, a standardised sign, an exchangeable signifier, a "likeness", with reference to an authoritative model.'⁶⁰

In *The Birds Fall Down*, Susie Staunton is the double agent of adultery, a traitor to her friend, Tania, through her liaison with the latter's husband. Her apparent poverty makes her a target of Laura's scorn. She is described as married to the son of a 'poor and unimportant peer' (*BFD*,40) from whom she is separated. Her attitude, described, it seems, largely from Laura's perspective, is produced in terms of poverty and hunger: 'she was in need of something she had not got, though she was keeping the particulars of her poverty a secret' (*BFD*,66). In possession of hair of 'ethereal abundance', carrying, then, the coin of sexual fertility (value), her torment is her inability to spend its golden currency: 'She had great possessions, she had this hair, but she was racked, as if she were wandering waterless in a desert, by this phantom yet unassuageable need' (*BFD*,67). Susie, in Laura's eyes, is the homeless: all hunger, want and a desperate if muted acquisitiveness. Tania, by giving her friend beautiful clothes, connives in her own betrayal, being 'infatuated with the delight of making her beautiful friend even more beautiful' (for whom?). The depiction of Tania is, by contrast, of a body full and generous. A graphic image points the opposition: 'In the triple glass Tania's bare arms, bare shoulders, half bare breast ... wove a pattern of rosy flesh round Susie's black figure,

still covered to the throat' (BFD, 343). Here's an apparent inversion: the 'legitimate' woman is unarmed, undressed; the 'other' woman protected, dressed. In a masculine economy, women's sexual desire can only be oppositional to / in competition with other women's desire. Desire competes for authority, only to come under masculine authority - the spectre of Edward's power haunts the scene, but he is largely absent from the stage.

Women's authority and power have been defined and determined by the place of the other; a place which offers a heavily compromised and dependent security. I have been reading the dispute within West's texts as dramatising a process of (sometimes reluctant) movement away from that frozen relation, which fixes women as objects of a dominating authority, rather than subjects whose empowering authority also recognizes the subjectivity of the other(s). Marginalised in the domestic, social, economic and political spheres of authority, the loci, structures and limits of women's (non patriarchal) power have to be redrawn / located elsewhere in West's fictional texts, given the exposure of the fallacy of the infallible father. Only thus can power become (be translated as) a field of potential, of innovation and creativity (political and artistic), a liberating dynamic which is motivated by and admits the processes of continuous change and difference. The exposure of figures of patriarchal authority as unstable offers an escape route, creates a space for the female performer, to

rewrite her performance. Moreover, the marginalised will always have energy for liberation

Sunflower is repeatedly given to express a desire for passivity.⁶¹ The way in which the term passive is used requires redefinition, since it appears to signify not simply a rejection of the frustrating 'act-ivity' in which she is conventionally trapped (acting on behalf of the other's will), but its replacement by a quality which is *not its opposite*; rather, a complex of power and anti-power, violence and peace, animate and inanimate. When she realises she is in love with Francis Pitt, her reaction is worth noting.

Pleasure swept over her, pricking the palms of her hands; and she seemed to have been promised the kind of peace she had always longed for, an end to the fretfulness of using the will, passivity. She felt as if she had become as stable, as immovable as one of the chestnut trees. But this passivity would be more passionate than any activity, for like a tree she had a root, force was driving down through her body into the earth. It would work there in the darkness, it would tear violently up through the soil again and victoriously into the light. She thought of that moment at her mother's funeral when the four dark figures stood beside the hole in the ground where there lay a black box holding the body which had caused them all. The ground, the ground, she had at last become part of the process that gets life out of the ground. (S, 143).

Passivity and (active, restless) pleasure are closely linked, and sexual desire an unstated though principal factor of their enjoyment. The maternal metaphor is also brought into play once more, adding further impetus to the challenge. While the narrator's voice cannot collude with Sunflower's desire for subordination, their voices speak together in a statement of desire for creative life.

In *The Thinking Reed*, woman's direct experience of her body occasionally erupts into the narrative, almost as if as a new discovery and one which contradicts so much of what the conventional mind dictates. Isabelle, as we have seen, is more than once struck by the thought that 'the world in which human beings lived was not the same as the one of which they spoke and thought' (TR, 78, 165). In the text the woman's experience gains significance as a symbol of powerful (if muted) inscription in contradiction to the passive obverse of her being inscribed and organised. After her breakdown, and having made her decision to return from the clinic to Marc, Isabelle examines her body in the mirror: 'serene in its muscular and venous wisdom, idyllic in its smoothness as a land where the art of writing had not yet been discovered, her body confronted her without memory'. Though history has destroyed (human life), the body's freedom from memory, and the amnesiac, regenerative text, allow the potential of a future (creativity). Of course, the woman's amnesiac body is here also compromised in its serving of the narrative line: its absence of memory allows Isabelle's reconciliation with Marc. Nevertheless, knowledge is relocated in the processes of subjectivity - in a 'venous wisdom'. The

following chapter 'examines [the woman's body] in the mirror' for signs of the subject(ed), and to discover a different form of writing.

4.

**Feminine / feminist:
looking at issues of identity**

We cannot handle our contradictions, our distressing multiplicity of characteristics,'

It is strange, it is heart rending, to stray into a world where men are still men and women still women,²

You can't imagine what maleness and femaleness would be if you got back to them in pure laboratory state, can you?³

Whenever West's abiding interest in the immediate and dazzling confusion of sex, gender and identity is particularly perplexed, she looks longingly into the far distance of elsewhere (past, present or future place) of 'real' men and 'real' women ('still' men, 'still' women - the temporal adverb has connotations of a timeless, adjectival stasis too), segregated and manageably divided: an impossible purity of a regressive, essentialist imagination.

Chapter three focused on the relationships constituting authoritative structures of patriarchy in West's texts, traced their fissures, and dubious though very real hold on power. With their exposure as non-essential constructs, comes the perception that there exists no 'magic bond between things and their names' (*TRN*, 122). Thus questions about the 'normative' notions of the (de)finities: female, feminine, sexuality and identity become textual issues (bodies, products). By examining these issues as they are represented in West's texts, the reader makes a

significant step towards challenging and reforming established notions of authority in respect of female subjectivity.

I hope to show in a chapter which refuses a final destination but which has a sure purpose, that the very notion of identity is very much about a hall of textual-cultural mirrors distorting one another in a combination and competition of angles (sexual, social, material and historical), shifting and modifying a range of views. Moreover, the ricocheting - the re-bounding - of identities within a single text and between individual texts highlights the significance of movement, of process. Mary Jacobus' words are a salutary reiteration of the idea, expressed in previous chapters, about the female subject's relationship to the phallus, to authority.

If there is no literal referent to start with, no identity or essence, the production of sexual difference can be viewed as textual, like the production of meaning. Once we cease to see the origin of gender identity as biological or anatomical - as given - but rather as instituted by and in language, 'reading woman' can be posed as a process of differentiation for which psychoanalysis provides a model. ... in Lacanian terms, the subject's entry into the symbolic order, and hence the subject's gender, are determined by relation to the phallus and ... by taking up a predetermined position within language.⁴

Signs of identity lead (back and forth) to the text: to the instability of language (as examined in chapter two), and of art. The text also constitutes the potential for producing flexible and innovative meanings.

An analogy is often drawn, directly or otherwise in West's texts, between the common perception of 'Woman' as object, and art as object - both as symbols of a fixed and alienated identity, reflections of the natural, the 'real', and subject to an Other's authority. Such a perception fails to take account of the woman as a subject in culture, with views (eyes, opinions, Is) to call her own. The (art) texts and the female subject positions represented within them, can be re-read as contradicting their objectification and shattering the hierarchical subject/object relation. An untapped feminine power, uncovered by the recognition of identity as process, affirms an impetus through which a redefined authority can be claimed.

In many of West's texts public and social life is explicitly conceived of as a drama, and its characters performing actors. The activity of performance, the dramatising of meaning, is mediated through language, and through the body. Historically, both have been texts of women's oppression, and therefore can become prospective texts of challenge and change.

The activity of performance may be linked to the degree of authority which a subject possesses and projects to confirm - for her/himself and for others - her sense of identity. It may also be linked to the authority exercised over that subject, which will in turn necessarily direct or at least influence her responsive performance. The apparent coherence of the subject's identity necessarily controls but doesn't obliterate what it

represses. Because of the way we, as social individuals must achieve a sense of control over our identities in order to live and participate as social beings, and because we transfix each other in the images we both project and perceive, we restrict our own and one another's freedom, through a process of objectification. The fantasy of the Other as the locus of wholeness, truth and knowledge, is the subject's attempt to fulfil her/his own desire for (in)difference.⁶

Authority, understood as the power to direct one's own performance, is compromised by familial, social and economic exigencies with specific regard to one's sex. Interpersonal restriction may be small, for example between two people who share a mutual understanding of their differences from one another and from their own recognisable (static) identities. Alternatively, the restrictions may be heavy, as for instance the images men have created of women, the positions they have fixed them in, both of which patriarchal society has traditionally considered both domestically and publicly acceptable, manageable and profitable. We saw in chapter three how male and female become translated in the social order into gendered oppositions, and how these gendered roles have an unequal relationship to power, to language, and to meaning, based on domination and subordination. By reviewing the issue of gender as *performative*, and *not* as a disguise which conceals some original sexuality: neither a fundamental masculinity, nor an essential femininity, the potential of a flexible identity and gender is admitted. West's fictional texts appear to know (and to not want to know) that, as Judith Butler remarks, 'gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject that might be said to preexist the deed ... There

is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'.⁶ Focusing on gender performance as act-ivity can also motivate the political impetus to challenge and change the very convention which assumes that a woman's performance is necessarily and inevitably directed from elsewhere.

The Other side

I suspect you of being the embodiment of some principle (HH,93)

In *Harriet Hume*, the eponymous character is, with irony, written down as a feminine figure, glutted with the qualities traditionally attributed to women. The production of this character reveals how, paradoxically, the practice of essentialising serves to distort, to pull into disarray the very object it seeks to delimit and constrain. The feminine is fantasied as the ideal Other, to the satisfaction of the masculine view. Of course, this is not to deny the pleasure affordable to the female view. After all, her culture has taught her to enjoy (fantasise) herself from the place of the Other.

I mentioned earlier that West distinguished *Harriet Hume* as a 'fantasy, not a novel'; she also described it as a piece of 'automatic writing'.⁷ Was it 'natural', then, for her to construct the Otherness of the woman through her masculine eyes (Is)? Was it (a)part of her that didn't know her self that so graphically visualised Harriet? Two of West's previous fictional narratives - *The Judge* and *Sunflower* - trace the principal female characters in the process of searching for (desiring) an

identity: Ellen, the young, naive feminist at first so sure of what she wants to be - an identity, by definition, only allows one thing; Sunflower, the actress, bewildered by the attempt to disentangle what her femininity, her identity mean to her from what she wants from others. *Harriet Hume* rejects that project (as too painful?) by a shift of perspective (to the other), and of tone (to the comic-ironic), and instead traces the way in which an identity is fixed, 'feminised' by a masculine circumscription and manipulation of it. The task of authorising Harriet's identity is given to Arnold. Sunflower, the reflective subject, is replaced by Harriet, the inverted negation of that position - as the latter is projected as the Other side of masculinity. For Arnold, Woman's (Harriet's) identity is at once the insurance of his own self-image, and the troubling (sometimes exciting) source of its disturbance.

Harriet and Arnold offer themselves as characters to be identified differently, through different readings, and from different positions. They can be read as individual perspectives, as the subject and object of one shifting position. In the text Arnold remarks that 'there was confusion in the first distribution of our parts' (HH,149), and yet for much of the narrative he tries hard to distinguish himself from Harriet. In order to understand himself, Arnold attempts to arrest Harriet, to capture her as the symbol of Otherness.⁶ As the narrative develops, he becomes increasingly insistent on perceiving Harriet as an art form, as a distinctive object, as alien, in order to persuade himself of his opposition to her. She is to stand for 'that combination of negative qualities which somehow produces a positive effect' (HH,287). As his

public identity becomes petrified in self-defence, so does his inclination to freeze Harriet into artistic integrity. At the same time Arnold the Condor(ex) (the mysterious vulture) longs to feed off the woman's (dead) flesh. The spin-offs from ideas of woman as a work of art and as a (living/dead) body will be developed later in the chapter.

During their second meeting, Arnold attempts to identify Harriet (in order to articulate his desires).

'I desire to know what *you* are, for I am sure *you* cannot be what *you* seem. *You* seem a little slut, but no one loves little sluts as I love *you*. I think *you* have some value above *your* seeming. I suspect *you* of being the embodiment of some principle, of having behind *your* head or under *your* feet an invisible scroll bearing the name of some quality such as the women in mural decorations of some buildings are prudent enough to display visibly? Are *you* love? Are *you* truth? *You* are not justice, though *you* might be mercy. Are *you* poetry? Or are *you* philosophy?...

'Write me down', she told him, 'as all that Arnold Condorex rejected.' (my italics, HH, 93)

Harriet's redemptive qualities save Arnold, rescuing everything that he throws away. Harriet Hume summarises herself in the name of Arnold Condorex. Who is Harriet? Who is Arnold's Other? He is unwilling to accept her as a sluttish woman of untidy habits, since to do so would be to lower his own self-esteem. He prefers to regard her as 'the

embodiment of some principle' (content fleshing out the form) since in that way he can fix her, order her, view her as some identifiable paradigm: a reflection of his idealised self. In Irigaray's terms, Harriet is transformed into a 'value invested idealit[y]', the product of 'man's labour and desire'.²

Arnold pursues an obsessive quest to distance Harriet as Other - the pronouns you/your are repeated sixteen times in the passage above. Of course, Arnold's obsession with Harriet as Other, and the discourse's support of his preoccupation, precludes or obstructs the apprehension of Harriet as subject, as anything more than Arnold's desired object, the symbolic negation of his conscious will, the not-I. In this respect the text resembles a parody of all those in which the idealised 'feminine' becomes the overburdened vessel of the not-I (the virgin/whore dichotomy exceeded and exploded), and where the I is dilated to such ridiculous size as to render them both figments of fantasy.

If the notion of feminine is treated comically in *Harriet Hume*, it is more often the butt of West's derision in both her fiction and non-fiction, by its association with a 'type' of woman that repels her, and one to which she never gets too close, so that the type can stand as a stereotype. In an article which appeared in *The Booklover* (1936), West discusses her own particular affection for her recently published novel, *The Thinking Reed*:

Though *The Thinking Reed* may be dear to nobody else, it will always be dear to me because of the qualities of self

control I displayed in writing it. For it happened that nearly half way through the book there appeared complete in my mind the crystallisation of a lifetime's hatred, the character of Poots. All my life I have loathed this sort of woman, with her long cigarette holders, her skimpishness, her fish-like stare, her gabbling, her horrid little hat shops; and I may mention with pride that she always loathes me at sight and I found that when I wrote about Poots I could beautifully relieve my bosom of all this burden of emotion and I knew with a total comprehensiveness everything that Poots would do or say in every situation. I could have gone on endlessly enjoying this relief, for I could have written about her till my book was as long as Webster's dictionary.¹⁰

West (here assuming the position from which Arnold speaks in *Harriet Hume*) knows 'with a total comprehensiveness' the objects of her revulsion: mercenary bodies of disjointed, fetishised parts. Isn't such 'complete' knowledge, the 'burden' of which she must discard, disgorge the result of her familiarity with this type, all women's familiarity with the epitome of their own commodification? The way the types are presented becomes a way of looking at them; West writes them out like 'dictionary' definitions. The feminine is here frozen into a category of diminution. The text can gloatingly stoop, in the production of an inverse of its own proposed status and value. Kitty, Poppy, Lily, Susie: such diminutive, abbreviated figures pepper West's texts. Their function in the fiction is an attempt to simplify, clarify, and dis-miss (refuse

to address the name of) the complex relationship between the female, the feminine and sexuality: an insecure identity; they stand as the others to West's principal female characters (their di-syllabic names also draw attention to their duplicity, their treachery). They are the uncomfortable reminders of the questions which those players resist.

In the course of *The Thinking Reed Poots*, whose name 'doesn't mean anything at all' (TR,175) - in English; in German it means 'make-up' - is depicted as someone for whom only a man possessing a great deal of money is a target worth pursuing. Isabelle (very wealthy herself) despises Poots as among those women who 'were ready to sell themselves' (TR,1820. The rejection of a commodified feminine is easier written out than acted upon, however.

Ellen, early in the narrative of *The Judge*, condemns feminine women for being opposed to the struggles of feminism, by the apparent acceptance of their relegation to a relatively powerless, marginal position in culture; and their pleasure in being fantasised as the Other, the decorative servant of a master masculinity. In *The Judge* Ellen's struggle is for a position of power, unfettered by oppressive gender distinctions, or, more specifically for one which allows her to discard her masculine-imposed femininity.

However, a daughter of patriarchal culture, Ellen is set to lose a lot.

While the costumes of femininity can trap women, they are also well-worn: a woman can feel comfortable (con-fort: strong and powerful) wearing them, she knows who she is (vis à vis the other) even if she compromises her own desires by such self-knowledge.

Not only in *The Judge* but through West's fiction, the view that the unadulterated female and male of biological sex are desirable (if impossible) characters is implicitly propounded. This comes, from her cultural inheritance, but also I think from a weariness with (and a fear of escaping) representations which trap the female subject, and deny her the independence to forge a new subjectivity which accommodates her own needs and desires. The view vacillates with that which holds that masculine and feminine enact the socially constructed gender performances to produce and confirm subject positions of the sexes, male and female, and stand for the signs of identity. These signs are oppositional and organised through a hierarchy of power relations.

The palimpsestic structure of this text described in chapter two, conflating the histories and perspectives of different subject positions in the story, becomes the means of re-reading (changing) the past, in defiance of a deterministic offering. Ellen, who dreams of a future for strong, independent women, Marion who seems finally resigned to women's subordination, and Richard, who opposes 'real' to 'false' women, together demonstrate - textualise - the perception of the female subject (her sex and her gender) as dependent on *position* (hers and the other's). It also dramatises the problems faced by a female subject who, as we saw in the previous chapter, wants to reject her mother's (patriarchal) legacy, and yet to hold on to the security it affords and the love it offers; who desires to forge her own path, and yet is bound to stumble over the one trodden by her fathers; and who experiences a sense of powerlessness through a patriarchal denial of her subjectivity. The feminist who claims self-direction in a social context as a right is faced with the struggle of

being effective in a play in which she desires to transform radically her limited role into one of influence without being moulded as she goes by the very law she rejects.

And yet, playing for attention, the feminine is bound to play at something the audience will *recognise*: so her power to modify her role will be limited by the (masculine) look conferred on her.

The third person narrator seriously (ad)resses Ellen's assertion of identity through her feminism: she both enthusiastically voices her narrative towards a forming of the energetic letters which produce Ellen, and contributes an impetus to Ellen's perspective by sharing her clothes. Nevertheless, her not infrequent, more distanced position as knowing ironist of Ellen's applauded but doomed single-mindedness, and her telling of other stories, complicates the reader's response, deflecting the effect of reading her identity as an aim. It is through the deflection that I read the text's power and the energy of an identity in contradiction, an identity untold. Marion, Ellen's future mother-in-law, a woman out-lawed by her society, functions as a counter to Ellen in terms of plot, but dramatises the (potential and silenced) contradictions of their singular identities.

West is criticised by Harold Orel for switching the focus of her story from Ellen to Marion half way through the narrative.' I would suggest that this transition can be read as a move to control the contradictions of female identity, and to allow the narrative as a pattern to continue at all, by splitting the differences into two perspectives who are thereby enabled to

externalise their contradictions, voice their unease, speak out of their silence: Marion, who 'has lost the way of speaking out everything but small talk' (J,219), and Ellen with whom the text closes with a 'quietness' which was 'the safer way' (J,430). As Marion says of herself and Ellen, 'we have many things in common' (J,262). The power struggle enacted between the two women raises a myriad of questions: what happens to the desires of a woman who is also a mother? How can women reconcile their desire for control of their lives with their dependence on love for the men in their lives? If Suffragettes were to gain women the vote, would they also win greater control over their identities?

Bound up with the increasing tension which the doubling or dilating of vision produces - the confronting of Marion's position with Ellen's - is the process by which the effects of women's oppression: weakness, subordination, dependence are translated into native features of the biological sex female. Only in this way is Ellen consoled in continuing to love Richard, and the story allowed to proceed, to explain itself in its conventional terms.

Ellen's reference to 'the insane sexual caprice of men, the not less mad excessive steadfastness of women' (J,429), is a postscript to a history of unequal power between men and women. Similarly, when relations between Ellen and Richard have severely deteriorated, the former determines to return to Edinburgh: 'Suddenly she wanted her mother, who had always packed and found things for her and who had been so very female, so completely guiltless of this excess of blood that was maleness' (J,369). Thus together with a resigned acknowledgement by the dominant narrative voice that we are

inauthentic actors on the experiential stage is the dream/nightmare of a fantasy that beneath all the costumes, the props and the scenery, there is a preciously (rarely and expensively) glimpsed natural order.

By taking refuge in the language of biologism the narrative almost covers - though not quite - an impasse of female masochism and self-sacrifice. Marion's suicide is the symbol of the inability of the narrative of a patriarchal culture to sustain its conventional 'logic' to a happy end.

Through the narrative of *The Judge* the reader can follow Ellen undergoing a process of self-objectification in response to her claim on male attention. After Mr McTavish James' assertion that she is beautiful, Ellen looks at herself in the mirror, 'as if, indeed, she were stripping herself quite naked, she faced her image'. His repeated comment, 'You've never looked at yourself before' (J,148), expresses the split subject who regards herself from an other's point of view. Concomitant with this self-regard is the implication that the subject objectifies herself in an exhibitionist stance, putting the female body on show. Later, when Ellen is thinking how Richard 'delighted in her and what pretty things he found to say about her without putting himself out', she is shown to 'put on her hat and coat with peacocking gestures and recklessly light-minded glances in the mirror' (J,243). In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger observes that men's actions are regularly interpreted as unmediated responses, as direct expressions of their emotions or feelings. Conversely, women's action provides 'an example of how she treats her own emotion ... and how she wishes to be treated by others'.¹² West's texts are absorbed by the lot of women who have to live with being looked at.

As her effective role in the drama being played out between Richard, Marion and herself diminishes, she employs those 'feminine' strategies she had earlier scorned in anti-Suffragist women. Richard, after all his determination to perceive Ellen differently from other women he has been involved with is, ultimately, Ellen observes 'more interested in her effect on his friends than in herself' (J,358). Trapped by their perception of her as a target of dismissible ridicule for claiming to be a Suffragette, Ellen's response is to play the performative game as a means of mental escape. 'She turned back to the men and brought the conversation to an end with a little laughing shake of the head, giving them the present of an aspect of her beauty to induce them to let her mind go free' (J,350). In battling to get herself into a picture framed by a masculinist convention, Ellen is heavily compromised and fearful of her fate in the patriarchal story. 'She no longer felt possessed of the perfect control of her actions, nor sure of her own nobility. Only a second or two ago she had betrayed her sex by pretending to be frightened by assuming one of the base qualities which tradition lyingly ascribed to women, because she had to be in [Richard's presence] no matter at what price. There was no knowing where all this would end' (J,405).

Ellen's control over the story in which she is dramatised is severely circumscribed. Her feminine mask puts up a front of its identity; it fixes and secures, reasserts the borders set up by its masculine opposite. This feminine is produced as a disguise, under which, according to Richard's perspective, a real - naive and childlike - woman hides. At the same time this real woman is shown through Ellen's subjectivity to be confused by her

conflicting sense of herself in relation to her own position: personally, socially, as well as of her desires and those of the other.

A scene in *The Judge*, where Richard, just a short time after he has met her, brings Ellen a bunch of flowers, demonstrates the interaction of social, sexual and economic relations which exposes the fallacy of a pure identity.

He watched her with quiet delight. In the course of his life he had given flowers to several women but none of them had ever plunged their stalks in boiling water. Instead they had stood up very straight in their shiny gowns and lifted the flowers in a pretence of inhaling the fragrance which the strong scent they used must certainly have prevented them from smelling, and had sent out from their little mouths fluttering murmurs of gratitude that were somehow no reference to the flowers at all, but declarations of femaleness. Surely, both the women who performed that conventional gesture and the man who witnessed it were very pathetic. It was as if the man brought the flowers as a symbol of the wonderful gifts he might have given her if they had been real flowers, and as if the woman had answered by those female murmurings that if they had been real lovers she would have repaid him with such miracles of tenderness. The gesture was always followed, he remembered, by a period of silence when she laid the flowers aside for some servant's attention, which was surely a moment of flat ironic regret.

But the roses that he had brought Ellen were no symbol but a real gift. They satisfied one of her starvations. (J, 92)

First of all, the third person narrator, most often in this text narrating through Ellen's position, here assumes Richard's perspective: 'The surveyor of woman herself is male: the surveyed female'.¹³ Richard's viewing 'delights' him, framing as it does, other (retrospective) and, he now perceives, 'false' viewings: his relation with 'several women', identifiable as one Woman. His narrative position demonstrates the masculine objectification of the other(s). Richard is presenting himself as the authoritative though innocent looker (his pose gestures towards the elimination of the speaker). His retrospective distances him from his own part in those other scenes: it is the alienated and impersonal 'man', not Richard by name, who was so 'pathetic'. The fetishistic objectification of the women is a function of the narrative process here, which elevates Ellen to the status of a 'true' woman in opposition to the 'false' ones. 'Little mouths fluttering murmurs' become ('declarations' of) 'femaleness'; this is in turn expressed by 'female murmurings'. The murmurings are sexualised, bodily (female). The women (so aware of being looked at) are transformed into their sex, into their observed body by a masculine view.

Ellen's response is, by contrast, perceived as unselfconscious, described in animal terms - she leans over the flowers 'wolfishly' (J, 92).

(Elsewhere, Richard watches Ellen, and perceives her 'as spontaneous as a little squirrel that plays unwatched in the early morning at the fringe of the wood' (J, 113): innocence on the verge of experience.) The confusions here between real and false women arise partly, it must be remembered from

the suggestion of relative economic poverty (of Ellen) and wealth (of the 'several women'); the latter could no doubt have afforded to buy bunches of roses for themselves. Richard expects to be 'repaid' by his women, rich or not.

Dressing up: feminine purchases

I have to dress because I'm on the stage (S,78)

It seems to me that the blurring of the distinction between acting as a profession and acting as a playing out of a personal and social position in everyday life is a deliberate strategy in the *Sunflower* narrative. The difference between the two realms is shown for much of the time to be negligible; all the world's a stage. One effect of the ambivalence is to show that the drama of human relationships is a drama of femininity and masculinity: definitive as long as men and women act up to the parts expected of them, whether through choice or compulsion. As chapter three showed, women are regularly denied the power to define their own roles, and therefore the capacity to change them. As Stephen Heath remarks, 'alienation is playing the game which is the act of womanliness and the act is her identity, she sticks to it'.¹⁴

The props of a woman's performance : dress, make-up, beauty, also become indispensable in fashioning the subject, at a time when (as today) 'women are sold their images in the form of commodities',¹⁵ which they may or may not be able to afford (what a woman does or doesn't have in terms of her economic wealth comes to figure in identity), and when they are bound to be 'clever about clothes' (J,209), pretending to have what they haven't got

(the phallus). According to Friedrich Nietzsche, women '"put on something" even when they take off everything. Woman is so artistic'.¹⁶ The question is, however, how far female subjects can claim artistic power and independence, and how far they are subject to and objects of (commercial) Art (when this signifies the aesthetic equivalent of the Other).

In her fascinating discussion of the development of the consumer culture around the turn of the century, Rachel Bowlby compares women as consumers to prostitutes, alike in their 'active commodified self-display'. Their difference lies, as she points out, in the fact that purchasing power is generally denied to the prostitute.¹⁷ Throughout West's fiction there are (usually oblique or passing) references to women in the (professional) pay of masculine desire. Interspersed through the text of *The Judge*, for example, are images of women, 'their faces turned to the line of rich men's houses' (J, 57, 425), women who 'insisted on being valuable' (J, 125). In *The Thinking Reed*, the wealthy Isabelle is scornful of those women who 'were ready to sell themselves' (TR, 182) by marrying for money, while in *The Birds Fall Down*, Susie Staunton's apparent poverty is suggested as the motive for her adultery with Edward Rowan. What each text also shows, however, is that all the women, whether economically, emotionally, or socially are somehow dependent on the dominant clout of a patriarchal, and capitalist culture.

In the Afterword to the *Sunflower* narrative, Victoria Glendinning draws attention to additional pages of the manuscript which are not included in the body of the definitive text. They merit attention, nevertheless, in relation to the commodity chain which binds and fashions identity in a

consumerist culture. Sunflower feels uncomfortable in the presence of upper-class women who possessed only 'snobbish complacency, money and a resonant family name'. One of these women is about to travel.

She had looked up at a railway poster and seen a woman sitting on the deck of a steamer with a rug wrapped round her under a sky on which letters wrote a name she had heard from the lips of people whom she regarded as her equals or superiors in this business of assimilating named things. Therefore she had gone to a named travel agency and booked her ticket, reserving rooms at a hotel she had seen named in the *Continental Daily Mail*, where she would find lots of people whose names are printed under photographs showing them sitting in tweeds on camp stools at the Fuffshire Point to Point or driving a golf ball, which surely itself would have a name, from the first tee at Le To^uquet; and at the appointed time she would shut up the country house she and her husband had first seen in a photograph under the name of a reliable estate agent in the front pages of *Country Life* and the flat that had been offered under an equally reliable name on the back page of the *Observer*, and would pass across Europe, looking up at times and naming places, till she settled herself on the deck of a steamer, wrapped in a rug she had seen named in the advertisement in the *Sketch* or the *Tatler*, at which point an artist would see her and realise how perfectly she expressed an ideal of foreign travel and would be inspired to paint a poster in which a woman would sit on the deck of a steamer under a sky

inscribed with the name of a place at which other women would look up.¹⁸

The passage expresses the self-enclosure, the circular trap of a world of commodified names (close to our contemporary scene of designer labels). The monotonous rhythms of the passage, and excruciatingly long second sentence, ends with a tormenting echo of its beginning: women looking at Woman.

In a similar way, Sunflower is 'News' (S, 14, 220).¹⁹ She is, in part at least, what the papers say about her, how the photographs produce and reflect her. Surrounded by pictures, reviews and posters of herself, she feels imprisoned: 'what's the good of a person going to a film theatre to forget themselves if all there is to see is themselves?' (S, 22). The plural in the singular - them/self, the singular in the plural ambivalence again conflates women to Woman.

What women wear is always important in West's texts because of the mixed messages that clothes offer; like words and the activity of performance, clothes are modifiable signifiers. Victoria Glendinning mentions that West wrote 'consistently of haute couture both as a serious minor art form and as an example of women's doomed, deflected aspiration to excellence'.²⁰ Sunflower muses on 'the beauty of tragedy and the beauty of good clothes, which is one and the same beauty' (S, 23), expressing the attraction / repulsion relation between the female subject and her performative ad(dressing) of her identity.

Who am I dressing for? My pleasure? The other's pleasure in me or a combination of both? And can I only know my pleasure through my performance of, and dressing in it? The claim made for the woman of the 1990s is that

she chooses to dress as she does; that she is in complete control. In a recent magazine article. Nicola Jeal argues that 'the new woman finds the silhouette of the corset fits her. Although she receives criticism - and envy [from whom? Her female competitors?] - the woman who dons the whole corset caboodle not in but outside the boudoir will counter that it is a celebration of women, by women. Her girdle's no longer killing her'.²¹ Such sentiments are surely misguided, since, as Jeal's comments inadvertently concede, the corset is still the popular advertisement of women's sexual desirability, ^{her} position, in 'the boudoir', rather than of their physical power and new-found independent confidence. And can women who 'envy' one another honestly find cause for mutual 'celebration'? Moreover, as Ros Coward convincingly argues, there still exists 'a fundamental unevenness between men's and women's relationships to sexual display and adornment'.²² As long as that inequality persists, women's pleasure will remain heavily dependent on the desire and look of the other.

In *The Judge*, having dismissed the notion that 'looks mattered one way or another' (suggesting the significant reciprocity of observer and observed), a sudden change comes over Ellen:

An animation of so physical a nature had come on her that her heart was beating almost too quickly for speech, and her body, being uncontrolled by her spirit, abandoned itself to entirely uncharacteristic gestures which were but abstract designs drawn by her womanhood. She lifted her face towards the mirror and pouted her lips mockingly, as if she knew

that some spirit buried in its glassy depths desired to kiss them and could not. She stood on her toes on the hard wooden seat, so that it looked as if she were wearing high heels, and her hands which were less like paws than they had ever been before, because she was holding them with consciousness of her fingers' extreme length, took the skirt of her frock and pulled it into panniers. She wished that she were clad in silk! (J,149)

Body and dress merge: the physiological is confused with the cultural, whose 'womanhood' suggests Ellen's 'uncharacteristic' pose to her.²³ She looks at herself being looked at from another's desire and sees herself differently, not unpleasurably; assuming the feminine role becomes fancy-dressing.

In the same text, Ellen despairs of the 'hen-like genteel women with small mouths and mean little figures that tried for personality with trimmings and feather boas and all other adornments irrelevant to the structure of the human body' (J,46). It is not only middle class women who are prey to such foolishness, according to Ellen. She remembers some of the poorer girls from her past:

usually bleached and ill-favoured victims of anaemia or spinal curvature, who had seemed to be compelled by something within themselves to spend their whole energies in trying, by extravagances of hair ribbon and sidecombs and patent leather belts, the collection of actresses'

postcards, and the completest abstention from study, to assert the femininity which their ill-health had obscured ... they proceeded through life ... intent on the business of establishing their sex. (J,54)

The final comment emphasises the precarious nature of the attempt to create an equation between socially appropriated conventions of gender and biological sex. West's distaste for poverty is again conveyed here, coupled perhaps with anger at a consumer culture where femininity costs money, and is defined by a price tag.

A different kind of dress signifies a different kind of woman. In the following extract from *The Judge*, the attitude expressed towards women's dress by Richard's ³perspective, highlights the difference between an apparently 'real' masculine world and an 'artificial' feminine one.

There were two ways that women could dress. If they had work to do they could dress curtly and sensibly like men and let their looks stand or fall on their intrinsic merits; or if they were among the women who are kept to fortify the will to live in men who are spent or exasperated by conflict with the world, the wives and daughters and courtesans of the rich, then they should wear soft lustrous dresses that were good to look at and touch and as carefully beautiful as pictures. (J,60)

In the first case, clothes are seen as somehow transparent, not a code or signifying system, but a natural bridge to the truth, to the 'intrinsic merits' which men possess; that is, of course if they're worn by men. Were women to dress 'curtly and sensibly' they would be copying men, putting something on: 'like men'. In the second instance, clothes are the signs which distract and give pleasure to the observer, the spender, who delights in their precisely self-conscious arrangement and is seduced by the awareness that they constitute an artificial covering (on which his sexual pleasure will be 'spent').

The (w)hole Woman

She ain't herself (AK, 215)

Through *Sunflower*, West explores the woman both seeking to disentangle subjective desire from the desire of the other (an impossibility?), and striving to match the needs she is assumed to claim (within conventional textual parameters). The problem for *Sunflower*, for the narrator, for the reader, lies in the fear of chaos, or the apparent nothingness that swirls beneath the clothes, since, she has been sold the belief that, as Stephen Heath remarks, 'adornment is the woman, she exists veiled; only thus can she represent lack, be what is wanted'.²⁴

Identity is construed by *Sunflower* as implicitly concomitant on the paradox of self-secure imprisonment. As the narrative opens, we learn that

Sunflower was 'all to pieces'. Having more time to herself than usual, she feels disoriented. 'It was simply that she was unused to liberty, so seldom free from the leash that jerked her back to heel whenever she was doing anything she enjoyed, that she felt at a loss when she was on her own' (S,2). Later in the narrative, when relations with Essington have been broken off, Sunflower feels her identity slipping away. 'But she had not wanted to be free. What good was that? It had made her feel lonely and unreal. If nobody was fond of you you wouldn't quite exist' (S,239). The juxtaposition (and separation) of the two 'you's function as the mirror interface, which reflects meaning to the subject.

For Sunflower, love acts as a mirror, reflecting, confirming an image of identity. Here is Sunflower the traditional female character placed when inscribed by the masculine ideal of the feminine, otherwise displaced. Yet her feelings of instability here give way to those of quasi-exultation: 'Now she felt more real than she ever had done before'. The happiness she feels 'was like clear music bubbling on and on ...' (S,239). This pleasure is felt with the belief that Francis Pitt loves her; 'because she knew he set a high value on her, she felt infinitely precious'. Having abandoned one god, Sunflower can only turn to what she perceives as a greater god, and Pitt becomes the Father of her re-creation.

Because she loved him she would always do according to his imagination. Surely a man who loved one like that was God to one, for he made one. He gave one life. For how could one live unless somebody one cared about wanted one to live in a

certain way? Otherwise one just flopped about. And a man who loved like that did not only make one, he made one after a beautiful image. He gave one not only life but salvation. Therefore one would worship him with one's body and soul until one died. (S,241)

The unusual note of her confidence (comparable to that of her trusting naiveté) is the mark of the split between narrator and character, the former ironising the latter for her deluded affectation. The absolutist terms resonant of Christian theology: 'God', 'salvation', 'body and soul' signify a confusion of context between ideal and real. The repetitive insistence of 'one' paradoxically pluralises, disperses its singularity; the pronoun's impersonality impresses on the sense of alienation and confounds its function to express collectivity.

Not accustomed to the power of writing herself, Sunflower's dependence on others is overwhelming.

She felt perturbed, flimsy, hollow, ephemeral, something that would disappear if people stopped thinking about her. The sight of her letters, which she had left lying on the table encouraged her. They would be all about her work, they would prove to her that she had a career, that she solidly existed, she would feel much better if she read them. (S,228).

Sunflower's body loses substance for her, becoming 'flimsy, hollow, ephemeral' without the other, and without (outside) the 'letters' which produce her. Independence can only mean estrangement for Sunflower. 'Who wants to be separate? Who wants to be alone?' (S,241) she asks herself.

Sunflower perceives life as a bad play and maintains a faith in the passing of this phase, and in the fact 'that there would come a time when all this nonsense would be given up and the real business of living would begin satisfyingly, nutritiously' (S,113); the familiar notes of dreamy essentialism echo from *The Judge*. The 'real business of living' is comparable to the 'real acting' of which Sunflower believes herself incapable. The idea is imaged as 'gleaming crystal' (S,155): facets, but no cracks or splits - the impossible ideal.

Similarly, Isabelle in *The Thinking Reed* admits that 'it had seemed to her a nervous and exhausting business to be a woman, unsustained by public opinion' (TR,344). That 'public opinion' has historically missed out on women's sense of their subjectivity, so for much of the narrative, Isabelle is shown as subjecting herself to the discomfort of trying to fit into the pattern of 'normal' female behaviour: a pattern which the narrator both ironises and yet faithfully respects as a project; thus Isabelle's character is both consciously critically dismantled and apparently produced as a 'whole', integral identity. Let us recall the lines quoted in the introductory chapter: '"But surely ... there is something extraordinary, something abnormal about women's lives?" But how could women's lives be extraordinary or abnormal since there are more women than men and they have always led the same sort of

lives?' (TR,134). The almost imperceptible break between character/narrator in the second sentence demonstrates the dialogue between Isabelle, and the voice that represents her, the latter merging with, then distancing herself from, or fortifying the perspective of Isabelle as a double voice. The woman's identity is thus dramatised as being in process on a *structural* as well as narrative level.

Isabelle, struggling for the recognition of her position by a masculine perspective, from which 'one must keep many things to oneself' (TR,133), feels stifled and frustrated, that a part of her life will go 'unrecorded'. It is remarked, however, that she 'kept on record nothing that she felt or thought under the stress of violent emotion' (TR,166). The experience of 'violent emotion' appears to be the site of not knowing oneself, of losing hold of self-(mis)recognition. Before going to André Vervier's house to dramatically and publicly destroy the roses he has sent her, Isabelle looks in the mirror: 'what she needed was to recognise herself as the person she knew, who she had been all her life, who was incapable of being forced to make a scene by the pressure of passion' (TR,39).

Lulah, in 'The Abiding Vision', by contrast, never makes a scene; before her breakdown she appeared to Sam as consistent and known. Only later is Sam haunted by the idea that he did not, after all, know her.²⁵ Lulah's breakdown is anticipated by a marked change in her attitude: her smile 'had become unnaturally fixed ... as bright, as changeless, as if she were a wax head in a beauty parlour window'. Finally she collapses. Only at this point is Sam made aware of her physicality, of her body: 'She,

who had till two days ago been the most graceful of women, had suddenly become chunky and clumsy to handle' (AV,213-14). Her body loses (for him) its light and finely proportioned symmetry. For Sam, she becomes unmanageable and thus, in a sense, free of the burden of her identity. He complains to Lily: 'she ain't herself' (AV,215). We hear that 'complicated claims on her attention' (AV,216) make her smile harden with resistance. Her regular breathing becomes for Sam the voice which refuses to return, seeming to say 'I know you are there but I will not come back' (AV,221). It is on realisation that Lulah is 'indifferent to his love, his sorrow', that Sam becomes seriously troubled. Her definition no longer depends on him. Lulah then seems to undergo a process of rejuvenation, so that she comes to resemble Lulah, the social hostess of her younger past. Now her expression is like one 'which had been hers on social occasions'. The alteration forces Sam to reassess and question his former relationship with her. 'He found himself thinking that at their dinners he had sat at the head of his table facing an automation, that he had mounted the stairs of great houses with a dead woman at his side'. So who is / was Lulah? The two contexts of past and present become interchangeable: Lulah the social figure and Lulah the invalid (in-valid) are apparently one. Sam is forced to reassess 'their common triumphs' (AV,222): the security of an abiding vision becomes questionable.

While Isabelle knows that 'for the rest of her life she would be pointed out as an hysteric, if not an actual madwoman' (TR,307), for her action in the baccarat room, she can be read as an obverse of Lulah. A consensus of outside opinion views the latter as broken, made helpless

by mental breakdown; Isabelle is given a voice to counter that view: her madness has a 'rationale'. She wishes to preserve for Marc the illusion that her behaviour in the baccarat room had been 'demented and blind instead of cunning and far-sighted', so that he will not accuse her of 'shrewishness' (TR,313). One stereotype is displaced by another.

In an attempt to fix a meaning for each other after their final reconciliation: in West's attempt to secure and justify the convention of marriage in the fictional form, Isabelle and Marc discuss their perceptions of one another (Marc taking the role of sage, Isabelle that of novice). He postulates that the subject only knows what is happening to her/himself 'from minute to minute'. The other, observing the subject, however, sees the 'whole' (TR,414) and, he implies, the *real*, the *true* individual. He goes on: 'I have often thought that in loving you I love a woman of whom you have never heard, of whom you have not the slightest idea, who is nevertheless entirely real'. Isabelle is troubled by her dishonest contradiction of his statement: 'I do not think there are many women to be made out of me. I am as clear as glass, you know everything about me' (TR,415). Isabelle voices over her difference. The woman Marc 'knows' is other than the Isabelle(s) made visible by the text; (the reader sees nothing of Isabelle from Marc's silent perspective); the illusory transparency of the realist form is admitted.

Marc expresses his confidence in Isabelle's resilience in the face of her recent experiences 'You have good manners, you will not break' (TR,417), he tells her. Against these words (which remind the reader

that manners maketh (wo)man) jars Isabelle's admission to herself that she has been 'shattered' (TR, 420) by what Marc has done to her. (These are the asides that don't spoil the story.) And then they embrace.

Break for reflection: female/feminine/sexuality/ identity

West's fictional texts rehearse all manner of the female/femaleness (she often interchanges the terms), feminine and sexuality, and the various means by which female characters make a mission of seeking a position and holding on to it for all they are worth. Female, feminine, sexuality, identity: all their 'meanings' have the potential of term(innate)ing one another, by enclosing, encoding and enfolding a dangerous and crudely simplified, hypostatized notion of Woman. So often the female spilling into patriarchal culture, conflates, spells feminine. These two in turn (intern) are constructed by and construct feminine/female sexuality - a woman and her relation to the sex female, and to her body as a sexual body of desire: a desirable body, a desiring body. As Rosalind Coward remarks, 'female desire is constantly lured by discourses which sustain male privilege',²⁶ perpetuate male power, and therefore a position of authority over women. In other words, sexuality 'is so often the vehicle for the expression of power relations'.²⁷ Ethyl Spector Person's statement here draws attention to the metaphoric function of sexuality. It signifies the place of woman in culture. (In West, female desire cannot be spoken of except in metaphor.) Chapter three examined that predicament. The present chapter looks at the figures of women produced through the discourse of the texts. The question is, however, who coins, who pays for the subject's metaphors? Her sexuality

(is the possessive pronoun really apt?) is the way she comes to fancy herself: to know herself, to desire herself, to imagine herself - through the other's eyes. Her sexuality becomes her (suits her, is her) when it's becoming to others. This out-fit (covering the split), female/feminine and sexuality - twin set and pearls (perfect match and sublimation) - constructs the identity. The way in which separates come together, modify and reflect one another through a specific cultural context which constructs women, is part of a general textual process which produces the 'whole' and power-full work of art. Against that whole, the size and (albeit corseted) power of the (textual) body disrupts the line and form container through a feminine desire and subjectivity which is fluid and impossible to fix.

Beauty and art

My beauty is me (BFD, 364)

The idea of beauty, so insistently and inextricably associated with women is, it seems, expressible only by the male. Kamensky (here alias Petrarch) lectures Laura in *The Birds Fall Down* on beauty - a 'most serious' philosophical concept. 'It's called the doctrine of Sophia, of heavenly wisdom, and it holds that women's beauty is the image on earth of the beauty in the cosmos, which is the wisdom of God as it is extended into the universe. Becoming flesh and uniting the Creator and the Creation, with no break between them' (S, 296). Kamensky's words carry dubious echoes of his own political dream: the production of an Absolute synthesis, no break, total unity. The dreams are doomed to explode into nothingness.

Similarly, initially worshipped for her beauty, rather than for her talents as an artist, Sunflower becomes the place of haven in a competitive industrial society. Essington knowingly explains to her that

she contained within herself two of the great legendary figures that man has invented everywhere and at all times: Venus and Cinderella. And they were not - he bade her remember - invented idly. They fed desires that must be fed if man is not to lose heart and die. For Venus promises him that there shall be absolute beauty in this world, that the universe shall bring forth perfection which shall make its imperfection a little thing, lightly to be borne; and Cinderella promises him that this harsh order of things which is life may only be temporary and subject to reversal at any time, so that the mighty may be put down from their seats and those from low degree exalted. (S,7)

The lofty seriousness of Essington's tone is undermined by its filtering through the third person narrative, in a way that ironises its quasi-biblical tone, and the definitive conclusions of its rhetoric.

Nevertheless, his appraisal does make a statement about a crucial qualification of women's conventional power: it is a fictive, mythical one 'invented' and invested in by a patriarchal society. Though Sunflower 'contained' those figures, she has to be told about them. Paradoxically, Sunflower is dressed up as a symbol of power, but divested of any of its effective value except in so far as those who have 'invented' her allow her to provide them with sustenance. The

invocation of Venus here recalls the image in *The Judge*, visualised by Ellen at her imagining Richard's past life in Latin America, of 'the broken body of the Venus at his feet and above his head the creaking wings of birds come to establish desolation under the shattered roof' (J,30): an image of Absolute beauty made derelict, the idealised Platonic spirit displaced by palpable flesh of a 'broken' body'.

Beauty is a subjective description transformed into a universal object: in a society where notions of beauty are commodified and displayed almost invariably in relation to the female body which displays its current particulars of an idealised and packaged shape, size and pose. The disjunctions between this ideal and women's subjective experience of their relatively excessive, transgressive physicality is a refrain heard through West's fiction. In *The Judge*, Ellen is quite horrified by Marion's 'terrifying quality of excess' (J,355).

In a moment of misery, induced by her feelings of aloneness, Sunflower reminds herself that 'she was five foot eight and every bit of her measured her what it ought to' (S,13). Later when Essington reminds her that she has 'to start being careful' about eating too much she (who fed his desires shouldn't be too greedy), admits to herself that 'she did weigh a lot compared to all these new lot who were as thin as paper knives. Still theirs was the type that seemed to be liked nowadays, so maybe being perfect in her type was as bad as being fat' (S,77). The type may be universal, but in a consumer society - where women must regulate their consumption in order that they maintain the standard

required of consumables - it cannot be more than ephemeral. So Sunflower has a sense that 'she was unhappy because of something to do with her body; something that, if it was not grossness, had a like contrast with the standards of the world, something that at any rate was in the nature of excess'. (S,83)

Women are not known apart from their looks (their own attractiveness, the other's gaze); beauty is a mark of (non)identity. Whether they like it or not they enter the beauty competition. Statistics of the body oppress its vitality. When Tania speaks of Edward's adultery in *The Birds Fall Down*, she comments that

he's rejecting *my* beauty, and *my* beauty is *me*, and *I'm* being rejected. But *I* can't say that, it sounds like vanity. That shows how impossible it is to be a woman. *One's* whole life depends on *one's* looks, but *one* mayn't *speak* of *one's* own beauty, and *one* mayn't say either that it's specially galling if *one's* husband leaves *one* for a woman who isn't as nice as *one* is *oneself*. That would be counted as vanity too.
(my italics, BFD,364-65)

The personal and possessive pronouns resound as affirmations of identity: and have the contradictory effect of calling it into question. Sandra Bartky comments that 'our identities can no more be kept separate from how our bodies look than they can be kept separate from the shadow selves of the female stereotype'.²⁸ The subject whose beauty, whose vanity becomes her (?) credo, is ultimately bereft (*vanus*: empty).

Tania's insistence recalls Arnold's objectification of Harriet in *Harriet Hume*. Tania here objectifies herself. The 'I' and 'my' slide into the formal and alienated 'one' from which she cannot avert her obsessive gaze. Luce Irigaray's comment about women's narcissism demonstrates the dilemma of women trapped in mirrors: '*we may question whether woman has a choice of being or not being vain about her body if she is to correspond to the "femininity" expected of her. Does not her sexual "usefulness" depend upon her being concerned about the qualities or "properties" of her body? If she is to solicit, support and even swell the sexual pleasure of the male consumer*'.²⁹ Bound to catch sight of herself, the woman is forbidden to speak for herself. Tania disregards the prohibition only insofar as she speaks to her daughter about the silence imposed on her: she voices to Laura the reason for her (dis)quiet.

Wherever women are in competition with other objects of exchange, it is because they depend (psychologically, economically) on the other's current value of beauty. Tania is given to eulogise her competitor's beauty: the dramatic irony demonstrates women's pathetic dilemma: they construct each other's images (seeing them through the eyes of male desire) and de-face each other in competition for the Other.

Tania's voice soared, 'Laura, look at her! Look at her hair! Ours is horse hair beside it. And look at her little, little wrists and ankles! Compared to her we're just carthorses. That's why we have horsehair. Oh, Susie, wonderful Susie!' But Susie shook her head and said, with the slight stammer

which always afflicted her when she was complimented, 'No, no I'm ...'. She did not end the sentence and define what she was. (BFD, 67)

Susie's attempt to assert herself - 'define what she was' - in the face of negation - 'No, no...' - is a statement that hasn't the strength to complete itself, aware of its duplicity. Tania dresses Susie to kill (Tania). (Nikolai's reference to the fact that he inadvertently trained Chubinov to shoot the former's own political allies makes a parallel with this plot.) Scenes between Tania and Susie are mostly presented as Laura's memories of scenes taking place in her mother's bedroom. Tania, trying various hats on Susie, was 'infatuated with the delight of making her beautiful friend more beautiful' (BFD, 343). She dresses her up in preparation for sacrifice to Edward.

The art of identity

This is no wholesome work of art (HH, 157)

The issues of female identity considered above - the construction of the feminine and its mis(s)-fit relationship to female subjectivity, its significant meanings as costume and mask, the concept of feminine beauty, and the complex informing of all these by female desire and sexuality - converge in an examination of the female characters' relation to forms of representational art, particularly those of statues, in West's texts. Throughout her writing there is a tension produced in the metaphor which draws an equivalence between female identity and representational art forms. On the one hand, the art form

is represented as a *work* (closed, finite, delimited and object, authorised from elsewhere), and the female subject transformed into an object of masculine fantasy; on the other hand, such representations are directly de-formed or can be re-read, re-presented as art text (open, fluid, both subject and object, woven in contradiction).³⁰

Representation of woman as a work of art satisfies the masculine desire which sustains the status quo, and fixes women in a subordinate position of power relations. Traditionally, such art with regard to the female subject becomes a symbol of sacrifice: an offering to a masculine deity, which ignores the woman as a subject with views (eyes, opinions) to call her own.³¹ Conversely, representation as art text, challenging the sacrifice, re-admits the authority of the subject, reinscribes her in a position of negotiable power which demands the re-evaluation of formal positions and the questioning of the subject-object relation as a definitively separable one. It is into this second category that the subject as a producer (an artist) as well as consumer of art can be identified (with) by the feminist reader, and clears a place for the expression of her own desire.

In the fictional texts, women's power to change their conventionally identifiable positions is restricted by their perception as commodified object bodies, powerless forms; these forms are therefore also, in West's writing, the metaphors for and production of their (infinite) transformation, their reclaiming of power, and their persistent affirmation of difference from their changing (mis)representations. Ellen, in *The Judge*, expresses the attitude. In response to Mr McTavish James' description of her as beautiful, she queries: 'but how beautiful?

... Like a picture in the National Gallery? Or like one of those actresses? ... I'm all for art as a general thing, but I'd much rather be like an actress' (J,148). The resistance to being compared to a picture is a protest against being exhibited, framed; the desire to act expresses the will to take a vital role in exhibition.

In *The Return of the Soldier*, the notion of art as a whole, all-embracing, and thus apparently pleasureable (meaningful) form is set up again and again in the narrative (in a desperate bid to compensate for the destructiveness of war), by the observation of objects of 'aesthetic' interest. The following passage, in which the first person female narrator conflates descriptions of an artefact at Baldry Court with a 'real' woman, Margaret, draws attention to the complex of mirrorings enacted in this narrative. In her projection of a traditional feminine perspective, West's position vis à vis that of Jenny, her narrator, seems uncomfortably close: that is, she both settles herself alongside Jenny's position, and feels discontented with it).

This was a shallow black bowl in the centre of which crouched on hands and knees a white naked nymph, her small head intently drooped to the white flowers that floated on the black waters all around her. Beside the pure black of the bowl her rusty plumes looked horrible; beside that white nymph, eternally innocent of all but the contemplation of beauty, her opaque skin and her suffering were offensive; beside its air of being the coolly conceived and leisurely

executed production of a hand and brain lifted by their rare quality to the not absolutely necessary, her appearance of having but for the moment ceased to cope with a needy environment struck one as a cancerous blot on the fair world. Perhaps it was absurd to pay attention to this indictment of a woman by a potter's toy, but that toy happened to be also a little image of Chris's conception of women. Exquisite we were according to our equipment; unflushed by appetite or passion, even noble passion; our small heads bent intently on the white flowers of luxury floating on the black waters of life; and he had known none other than us. With such a mental habit a man could not help but wince at Margaret. (*ROTS*, 117-18)

Arguably the most striking image in the novel, the nymph (paradoxically, at first sight deceptively analogous to, the epitome of the 'bland state of desireless contentment' which West had elsewhere attacked as the 'romantic conception of women'³²), Margaret and the perspective through which they are produced, stand at the crux of a problematic narrative. The passage is constructed within a protective gilt frame of reference: the stately interior of Baldry Court (rarified, 'bald' space of phallic absence). That frame is constructed within the larger one of a war-ridden globe - so the reader is tempted into the seemingly still point of a tearing world. The sculpted, clearly defined form of the white feminine figure as object represents the classic principles of an aesthetic of simplicity, balance, regularity and purity of form, (which represent for the narrator albeit increasingly fragile aesthetic and

moral standards) on which the principle of authority is precariously maintained. The nymph is also narcissist: the frozen 'eternally innocent', in 'contemplation of her own beauty'. Jenny's increasing scepticism about her criteria for standards of beauty complement her growing if reluctant awareness of what those standards refuse. The nymph makes an indictment of a woman, Margaret, who disrupts (erupts like 'a cancerous blot') the poise (pose) of the scene. The possessive 'her' of the nymph becomes difficult to distinguish from Margaret's 'her': the one's 'her' slides into the other's. The art object merges with the place of Margaret, in the very process of being defined *against* her. Jenny, the narrator, makes a direct comparison between the feminine identity which the nymph represents and her own position as female observer of an art object which, mirror-like, she desires, to confirm her image of herself, as object 'unflushed by appetite or passion': another narcissistic exchange of fixed looks. She claims the nymph as an image with which she and Kitty identify since 'that toy happened to be also a little image of Chris's conception of women', (the dismembered, alienated 'equipment' of 'hands', 'knees' and 'feet': a plaything he can put together).

The description of the white nymph here bears a close resemblance to one which elsewhere in the text depicts Margaret in her youth. 'She was then just a girl in white who lifted a white face or drooped a dull gold head. And as that she was nearer to [Chris] than at any other time' (ROTS, 78). The pose of the nymph is illustrative of the masculine conception of the 'feminine': 'crouched on hands and knees ... her small head intently drooped'. The attitude of submission and formal

diminutiveness, and of passivity, perhaps explain the possibility of the maintenance of apparent calm and order. When we also consider that traditionally the figure of the nymph has also been defined as 'the veiled one', however, the sculpted form becomes more interesting for what it hides than for what it reveals, for what it omits than for what it represents. It also brings it paradoxically closer to Margaret who is compared to a cancerous 'blot': something which hides or obscures.

Jacques Barzun, discussing the ideology supporting the principles of classicism, passes comments pertinent to this study.

We may take it for granted that every epoch looks for unity - unity within the human breast and unity in the institutions sheltering man. Now the straightest path to unity is to choose from all possible ways of living those that seem to the ruling powers most profitable, most sensible, most general; and to enforce these as a code for public and private behaviour. The laws soon give rise to attitudes by which any man may shape his feelings, and this in turn brings about a ready understanding among men. For no matter how arbitrary, conventions are useful and can be relied upon in proportion as they are held inviolable'.³³

Barzun utilizes the appropriate generalizations and assumptions to describe the ideology in question. 'Every epoch' has 'ruling powers' who produce 'laws': the mode of impersonality creates an apposite frame. The laws give rise to attitudes which ensure the common 'understanding among

men', men whose 'conventions' become 'inviolable'. Margaret's appearance strikes a note of discord, unsettling the inviolable', interpreted by Jenny as a disease, but perhaps more readily readable as the latter's reaction of discomfort. Margaret's physical ugliness is emphasised again and again. Ugliness is, of course, a relative concept, and opposed by the narrator to an image of classic beauty. The word ugly is derived from the Norse word, *ugga*, meaning fear. Jenny's initial revulsion from Margaret is a reaction to someone she finds threatening, since Margaret does not fit into the ordered picture. When the latter first enters the life of Baldry Court, Jenny feels sure that 'this queer and ugly episode ... would dissolve and be replaced by some more pleasing composition in which we would take our proper parts; in which, that is, she should turn from our rightness ashamed' (*ROTS*, 31). The feminine (nymph-like identity with which Jenny has felt safe is one which she sees Margaret as rudely contradicting, and so threatening her own sense of equilibrium. Jenny's dissatisfaction underscores each line as the myth of the essential woman is progressively redressed.

Jenny's own verbal perspective is very close to the conventional patriarchal one, even though, as a woman, her description of other women is revelatory. At one point she describes Kitty as 'controlling her face into harmony with the appearance of serene virginity' (*ROTS*, 57). While criticising Kitty's self-objectification, she is herself party to the tricks of the trade: the exercise of control, the maintenance of a front. In the light of the traumatic events at Baldry Court, Jenny too feels obliged to preserve for Chris the image of the cousin he

recognises. 'But now I was too busy reassuring him by showing a steady undistorted profile crowned by a neat proud sweep of hair instead of the tear-darkened mask he always feared ever to have enough vitality left over to enjoy his presence' (*ROTS*, 130)..

In *Harriet Hume* the (pseudo)authority which Arnold and Harriet are designated to represent as 'masculine' and 'feminine' objects, is directly linked to the concepts embodying classical art which the narrative both iconises and ironises. The perception of art as an unchanging object, above the contamination of re-vision by an observing subject may be compared with that which conceives of women as possessing definitive and stable, 'feminine' essences, which serve to counter and complement a 'masculine' essence.

By creating Harriet as a picture or sculpture, Arnold can satisfy his desire for Harriet as the stasis that reflects coherence. The image of Arnold as desiring subject and Harriet as object-entity is designed by the perspective of the former when Harriet comes to warn him of the imminent exposure of his political corruption.

'You are different in my eyes tonight. How sculptural you appear in this metamorphosis, with your marble pallor, and the close flutings of your gown disposed about your classically perfect form! You remind me of a painted lunette in one of my own upper rooms, in which the artist depicts a young man lion-ruddy with the hues of health, stretching out his arms in eternal desire towards a young woman that stands

in the recesses of a cave, all black and white, and bloodless and perfect, like yourself. 'Tis Orpheus mourning for his Eurydice, gone from him to death.' (HH, 298-9)

Woman's immobility/identity (death?) becomes more insistent in proportion to the corruption and degeneracy of the man. It is significant that at this point, when particularly distraught by the 'confusion' of his world, Arnold should remark to Harriet:

'I would transport you to a purer world where things sit more stably in their categories. I would clang an iron gate on you, and shut you in a garden, where there are no coloured flowers, but only tall lilies standing in wet black earth, and no trees save the decent cypress. 'Ah, my love!' he said, clasping her very amorously, 'what pleasure it would give me to shut you away from all the heat of living!' (HH, 209)

Woman's identity conceived of as art object results in her death. In reaction to Arnold's words, Harriet wrenches herself away from him. Nevertheless, through the discourse, she is 'shut', encased, by his perspective of her.

At the same time the third person narrative voice is itself preoccupied with representing a detail of line, form and colour which Victoria Glendinning describes as the text's 'baroque' style - the place of excess which the convention of Arnold's disciplined, classical mind

tries to forbid and yet enjoys. At one point in the narrative, Harriet, telling Arnold stories to amuse him, relates the 'experience' (HH,156) of a friend of hers, who had a strange encounter with magically animated art forms: female sphinxes. It is amusing to note both the ways in which these animals are represented as transgressing the conventional constraints of classical art, and in which they invert the conventional power organisation in *their* assessment of the observer. The female art object comes to life as a body, not a line, as a voice - and a sense of humour. The sphinxes represent the excess in motion that a 'feminine' self-control disallows.

The sphinxes are described as 'two large bodies', 'moving with unusual abandonment', with 'loose hair, and proud yet passive faces and wings' (HH,156). With 'a hot and scented breath', one of them 'licked her face and a voice at once like a woman's and a lion's (say like an oratorio contralto's) enquired of her from what museum or gallery or private collection she had come for the Hour of Animation'. She is then condemned as being 'no wholesome work of art' (HH,157). The third person narrator steps back to make the comment that 'we disgust works of art by our meaninglessness, our diffuseness in time ... without a quarter as much significance as a picture establishes instantaneously, and our smell of life' (HH,157-58). It is the merging of the 'smell of life' with art, that informs the potential for breaking free: for an iconoclasm which offers a change of direction to the female subject. The unease which is the regular result of attempting to still female desire by confronting (facing) it with models: pictures, postcards, famous

females, ideology, security, fails to be always constrained by the texts.

When Sunflower is given to express an active sexual desire for Francis Pitt, she imagines herself as a sphinx of grotesque appearance and formidable power. Only through such substitution - an image which escapes identification as a fetishised object of feminine beauty, the object which belongs to the Other - can she contemplate what she 'could not think in words' (S,204). (Her narrator relishes the process of transcribing pictures into words, merging words into pictures.)

She enjoyed among other forms the likeness of a sphinx, crouching in a vast desert and thick darkness, unappalled because her head reared high into the night and was changed into something more suited to her fierce intentions than her present loveliness, because her breasts were not flesh that would die but rock that would endure and were great enough to suckle the earth, and because her hands were now huge claws between which he lay in the likeness of a swaddled child with a sceptre beside him. (S,204)

Women's bodies have been loaded with burdens; those burdens can become *their metaphors* - liberated by different meanings, meanings which don't rest on the body alone.

In the metamorphosis through which female desire becomes expressible, representable, Sunflower forgets her 'five foot eight', instead filling

a wide and high space through desert and darkness, where her 'present loveliness' (a gift to the Other) becomes irrelevant, her flesh no longer perishable meat for his sustenance. Nevertheless, he is still the (child) king, she his mother/nurturer, so has anything really changed? I think the shift in imaginative power is in itself an important move. The impetus of a different image for the woman, defies conventional bo(u)nds, and the different organisation of power is expressed here: Sunflower's body acquires a potential, becomes the *beginnings* of a metaphor for future feminine power where the phallus, 'a sceptre', is laid to the side.

The difference is highlighted by comparison with a point earlier in the narrative, when to comfort herself, Sunflower considers that 'if she was turned into a statue they could put her into a museum without getting an artist to alter her'. But she realises then that 'it would not do'. Recognising her 'immense physical conspicuousness' she images

a picture of herself as a vast naked torso, but not of stone, of living, flushing flesh, fallen helpless on its side in some public place of ruins like the Forum in Rome, with ant-droves of tourists passing incessantly round her quickly, inquisitively, too close. Sometimes it was hot and dry winds swung against her weakly like a tired arm, flung dust on her, and dropped again; and tourists crowding along in the shadow of her limbs put up their sweaty hands to experience her texture and stroked the grit into her flesh.

Sometimes it was wet, and her groins were runnelled with thick shining ropes of water; and the tourists going quicker than ever, rushed along her flanks and pricked them with the spokes of their umbrellas. (S,13)

One image is shattered as others are re-membered: the broken body of the Venus in *The Judge*; the contrasting 'little image' of the nymph in *The Return of the Soldier*. The vision as mental picture is perceived whole, objectively by Sunflower from without. But at the same time *she* is within the moving picture as a subject, the object herself under scrutiny, recounting her experience of the torment of subjective vulnerability. Sunflower's two positions are occupied simultaneously and blur the inner-outer, subject-object distinction through a shifting signifier.³⁴ 'Tourists' who come to see the sights are also looked at. The female body is public property, ruthlessly tampered with. This seems to account for the paralysis - 'helpless'ness - of its potential power, vividly articulated: 'vast', 'living, flushing flesh' (not the 'equipment' 'unflushed by appetite or passion' presented by Jenny in *The Return of the Soldier*). A similar passage occurs near the close of the narrative, where Sunflower imagines herself as both object-image and subject-body, observer and observed:

It was lovely, just standing there in the brightness. It would not be so bad to be an image of a saint that stood for ever out of doors, in a shrine at the turn of the road above a valley, watching the sun burn the green corn to brown usefulness, watching the spears of rain strike down into the

earth, which they do not kill but make more living since they change the dust to wet mould, until that day when lightning flashes, and mountains are cleaved to their stony roots, and all images become flesh. During one's waiting one would give hospitality to little creatures. Within the hollow of one's gilt diadem a bird might build its nest, and soon short flights of nestlings would proceed from one's head like rays; and she had heard of a wayside Madonna, creviced by weather within whom wild bees had made their honey. That pleased her. She became quite still, enacting to herself how it would be to stand in rain and shine with full wooden skirts about one, while in a hollow of one's body dark buzzing principles of life built cell upon cell of golden, feeling sweetness; and on her face she felt the sweet smile all images of holy women wear. (S,261)

The image (of Woman) is permanent, stood 'forever', and yet it waits for the day when 'all images become flesh': the future living picture when women becomes subjects of their own bodies (as 'one' becomes 'she'); identity is fixed and threatened by the imminence/immanence of the body. The immaculate Madonna is haven to the force of creative life. The contrasting sources of 'sweetness' (sensual pleasure) and 'sweet' (pure innocence) write the ambivalence of meaning about women on the 'wayside'; woman as subject in the 'dark' process of life; woman as static replica of the idealised and virginal woman.

'I would like to be a sculptor' (S,257) says Sunflower in a burst of confidence at the end of the narrative, writing the desire for a different art, a different identity.

The subject of art

Every person was different, every work of art was different (CA,235)

Of all West's fictions, it is the *Saga* which represents a tour de force in the simultaneous formation and dissolution of a new identity. Rose, the first person narrator, as she 'grows up', becomes indistinguishable from the authorial voice. Rose is the only principal female character in West's novels who follows a profession - as a musician - which this voice traces closely. Where Harriet Hume's role as a professional pianist is produced as an accompaniment, and Sunflower, the actress is off stage (although mostly on stage), Rose's art is foregrounded in the text. The *Saga* plot offers the neat schema and pattern for the development of an identity. The re-production of the 'I' from childhood, through isolated and lonely young adulthood, to success as a professional pianist, and personal, sexual fulfilment in middle age, offers a mythically consoling reward to the author whose experience was never so generous. 'I' is the desired point and direction of existence to which all strands of the narrative weave. The notion of a unified subject standing at the 'end' of the story is the *Saga's* proposed teleological pattern - everything will turn out alright - the refrain which impels the subject onwards. Of course, since the narrative remained unfinished at West's death, the subject remains most obviously and clearly open.

Not until the 'loss' of Rosamund ('Rose' is a fragment of the 'whole' ephemeral / eternal mirror Ros-a-mund) are Rose's feelings of alienation (from herself, from others) significantly foregrounded, and the forming of relationships outside the family posed as a problem: 'I belonged to a small group that was forever complete and closed' (CR,203-4). Having spent so long identifying others, the subject is afraid to be in touch with herself. Part of this fear stems from the feeling of her physical body as a burden : an object which cannot escape (figurative) abuse by a masculine other, and as the locus of potential sacrifice (a woman's body is only for giving away in satisfying male pleasure; in childbearing). The adolescent Rose describes her sex as 'fatuous' (as Ellen in *The Judge* wants to be 'just like a man' (J,44), and Isabelle in *The Thinking Reed* 'detest[s] being a woman' (TR,418): their awareness of sexuality coming from the place of the other in a social structure where the woman is positioned as an object of subordination. Correspondingly, physical maleness, as the weapon of that oppression, is repulsive to Rose for much of the narrative. Yet, 'maleness' as a conceptual category: of 'knowledge', 'strength', 'wisdom', 'power', is attractive to her. Only through her relationship with Oliver (the time for revisioning symbols) is she given to discover and value her own sexual pleasure: 'He came towards me and I became rigid with disgust, it seemed certain that I must die when he touched me, but instead, of course, I lived (CR,233).

Rose comments that her marriage to Oliver 'had been as important an event as being born' (CR,250): a return to the place of 'unity', healing the splits which have fissured the F(f)amily: 'But this, of course, was

what love between a man and woman was for. One's family grew away from one, from the first unity divergencies developed; and at that point one started another relationship at the point of unity' (CR,242).

At this point the narrator as subject gathers strength to proceed. Old moulds are discarded. During this brief burst of energy (before the narrative is abandoned) the text is crowded with colour, with lyricism, as though the 'I' is asserting her sexual and sensual energy. She comes to inhabit a world where 'there were not two of anything alike, every person was different, every work of art was different, every act of love was different, every world was different. ... I could believe that this precious intricate creature I held in my arms, who made love and wrote music, would never be destroyed' (CR,235). Sexuality and creativity become complementary forces rather than mutually inhibiting under the gaze of the other. 'It was so strange that this new ecstatic life ran parallel with the life I knew' (CR,249). For the first time in the text female desire does not subordinate and compromise her subjectivity, her creativity. While, as remarked earlier, sexual consummation marks a significant moment in the narrative, it is part of an *ongoing* process rather than representative of (anti)climax or closure.

With Rose's marriage, Mary, her twin ('we were nearly the same person' (TRN,23)) takes on the role of the 'old' Rose, the other voice which addresses Rose's residual fears. 'Mary and I were not as we had been' (CR,235). For her part, Mary, regards Rose as having been written on, albeit 'printed by a new process that got in all the colours' (CR,250). In reply to Rose's assertion 'millions of people, millions and millions

of people, almost all people since the world began have got married', her sister remarks that, by the same token 'everybody since the world began has died' (CR,236). The sliding of a doubled consciousness into separate subjects of singular views gives the affirming 'I' a persuasive illusion of strength and conviction - especially as Rose's report of the sibling's challenge produces it as misinterpretation. Nevertheless Mary's position does disrupt the smoothness of a conceptualised unity: 'we ceased to be nearly identical'. Now Rose regards Mary as 'still like a girl', who 'walked lightly and was alone. I longed to be with her, though I rejoiced at being in Oliver's arms' (CR,272), invoking images of, on the one hand, the process of the restless subject, (inspired by female friendship) and on the other, the contentment of an asserted identity (the result of male/female partnership). (In the *Saga's* synopsis Mary gives up her career as a pianist and withdraws from the public arena.)

It is not incidental, I think, that Rose should be produced as a musician: the impetus of music boldly performs functions of both reparation and dispersal which constitute the shifting subject position in the narrative. Sexual pleasure, an uninhibiting love for another and music (art of neither subject nor object) compose an impelling (and utopian) female power. In Julia Kristeva's words: 'The amorous and artistic experiences are the only ways of preserving our psychic space as a "living system"'.³⁵

As a non-representational art form music has obvious attractions: as an escape from the visual dramas which torment (and sometimes give pleasure

to) West's fictional female characters; it is the arena in which the female subject is on display, performs her identity: with relish or with discomfort, on her own direction or under that of the other(s).

As a concert pianist, Rose does not escape the performative role, of course: she spends her professional life on stage; and in one sense music demands her self-sacrifice: at one point Rose describes herself being 'stretched on the rack' (TRN, 142) of her vocation. At the same time, however, she is in control of her performance, her art is in part a projection of her subjectivity, her interpretation of musical notes (making objects subjects) expressed to her audience. The losing of the 'I' in music, is the dissolution of gender conflict and of a subject/object distinction: in the experience of semiotic *jouissance*. Kristeva summarizes its vitality: 'Our only chance to avoid being neither master nor slave of meaning lies in our ability to insure our mastery of it (through technique or knowledge) as well as our passage through it (through *play* or *practice*). In a word *jouissance*' (my italics).³⁶ At the same time as music offers 'an answer to the pit' (CR215), therefore, it necessarily involves the disruption of a fixed subjectivity.³⁷, a challenge to stable meanings.

Conclusions

In response to Rose's question, 'What is music about?', Mary comments that music 'is about life, I suppose, and specially about the part of life we do not understand, otherwise people would not worry about explaining it by music. But I can't say what I mean' (FD, 390). Music doesn't explain the (life) text; the text can't explain music. It is the relentless effort to redefine relational meanings between subject and object, to express them differently, to engage in a process by which authoritative positions, constituted in language, are consistently reviewed and differently performed, in changing historical and cultural contexts, that makes West's texts and their music worth rereading. For feminism this practice means the reappropriation of art as text: revisioning the subject's relationship to the arts she (re)produces, the narratives and the subjectivities she rediscovers, and the palimpsest of meanings which they hold for her.

I would like to make a practical reiteration of these concluding remarks through a brief re-reading of extracts from two texts by West: one written near the end of her life, the other when she was a young woman of twenty-three. Each piece offers a way back, and forward, into the other, and suggests a present in the past and a past in the present of her texts. By relativising and contextualising the terms that express authority generally, and issues of gender and female subjectivity

specifically, the readers of West's fiction open up the possibilities for its productive future.

'Edith: The Bomb Story' is an unpublished short story West wrote in the summer of 1982.¹ The narrative is a surreal, ironic, tragi-comic, life-in-death account. It focuses on a married couple, John, and 'his wife' (she remains nameless), struggling to survive in the devastated remains of a world of nuclear destruction. While John is briefly optimistic that their chances of a future life lie in the hands of an apparently all-knowing man he has heard of, his wife is extremely sceptical. John's hopes are dashed, however, when, with his wife, he finally visits the man in his hospital bed. Instead of offering the pearl of wisdom for which John was hoping, the sick man simply whispers, 'please tell me what is happening'. The couple then try to divert their hopes for some kind of future elsewhere. John speaks.

'Don't you remember how one year we went to Cap Ferrat and saw all the eucalyptus trees looking dead as doornails because there had been a hell of a frost, and three years later we saw the same trees looking fine?'

'So they were. And it may turn out all right. After all, it's too soon for things to have got organised. There may be people who can turn some of this back, but who are somewhere else, and we don't know when they can get there.'

'That's why I hoped that that man whom everybody compared to Einstein might tell us something useful. Oh, dearest, I'm so ashamed I went on so long badgering you to get something

out of him. I kept on thinking of the queerest thing title of a book we had at home when I was a kid, "Last Words of Famous Men".'

'Did any of them get down to saying anything good?'

'I don't know. I never opened it to see. I just took it must be something special because it had the title in gold lettering, and when I grew older I remembered that my father had bought the book from a pedlar who was in particular poor shape, my mother gave him coffee and cookies, and I then began to doubt it was really a high-class book which deserved my attention'

His wife mocked him behind her hand, and said 'You realised it wasn't written by Einstein'.

For John, the gold embossed lettering, suggesting the significance of the tome (tomb), was first of all so impressive as to prevent him from opening the book at all. Later, the memory that the book had come into his family's hands from a poor man caused him to doubt its status, and he decided it couldn't merit his attention anyway. The power relation between text and reader is then reversed but the impasse sustained.

The wife was interested to know what John had found in the book. But as long as it remains closed, it remains dead, as do the 'Last Words of Famous Men'. Had John opened the book's pages, he would have made some exchange with the text, the men of letters (letters constructing men) would have '[got] down', moved from their deathly status.

By contrast, the juxtaposed images of the eucalyptus trees, one year looking 'dead as doornails', then at a later date 'looking fine', suggests the potential for change and growth contained by apparently dead wood. The word eucalyptus comes from the Greek verb *kaluptein*, to cover or hide; the trees thus stand as potential signs of uncovered meanings, signs whose meanings can be changed.

West's article, 'The World's Worst Failure', focuses these ideas in terms of gender. In this piece, published in 1916, the first person narrator looks at the position of middle-class women in her society, and at herself as a woman and as a writer in that frame. The article's ironic tone foregrounds the difficulty of fixing the author's position in the text, and also acts as a tantalising draw to the reader to engage in a reading that necessarily takes up different positions and perspectives.

The narrator is apparently depressed to find a subject in conflict not only with other 'feminine' women but with herself; presumably this is why she titles the article 'The World's Worst Failure'. There are no prizes for guessing to whom those words would conventionally refer. Much of the article is spent satirising two acquaintances: one French, one American woman, whose self-obsession and narcissism, frustrate and anger the writer-narrator for their wasting of creative and productive energies on 'calculating coquetry'.² At the end of the article she takes a look at (writing) herself.

And I - I was a black-browed thing scowling down on the inkstain that I saw reflected across the bodice of my evening dress. I was immeasurably distressed by this by-product of the literary life. It was a new evening dress, it was becoming, it was expensive. Already I was upsetting the balance of my nerves by silent rage; I knew I would wake up in the night and magnify it with an excited mind till it stained the world; that in the end I would probably write some article I did not in the least want to write in order to pay for a new one. In fact I would commit the same sin that I loathed in these two women. I would waste on personal ends vitality that I should have conserved for my work. And I was sinning for the same reason, for what could make me drape myself in irrelevant and costly folds of petunia satin, and what could make me forfeit my mental serenity at their defacement, if it were not some deep and overlaid but sturdy instinct for elegance? I perceived suddenly that in every woman there is just such an instinct which urges her, just so far as it is not resisted by her intelligence and education, towards an existence such as that of the Frenchwoman who now, comically desolate as a mateless monkey, was murmuring, '*Une femme doit plaire - C'est son bonheur*'. That is why woman is the world's worst failure.³

If that concluding sentence means a despairing indictment of women, I want to read it as their affirmation, refusing the famous last words, reopening the text.

'Woman', the epitomised reflection of the 'world's' textual authority, certainly fails to place the subjectivities of women, though they are glimpsed throughout. The article is filled with reflections of Woman; presumably the absent but pervasive 'world' standard is the great Man. The narrating 'I' both distances herself from the other women, (in her view of them as Woman) and admits her uneasily close relationship to them. Their foreign language isn't so different after all: the narrator understands *'une femme doit plaire. C'est son bonheur'*. The gender ambiguity of the personal pronoun in French, blurs the issue of who exactly the pleasure does belongs to, however, and this is the problem with which the writing 'Is' wrangle. The narrator dramatises her own splitting: 'And I - I...', the writing I attempting to alienate her other lavishly clothed body as an object, but finding her 'I' uncomfortably involved in the process of textualising its difference from 'the black-browed thing' that is also herself.

The bodice spread with inkstain makes a graphic palimpsest: the sign of the conventional feminine is written over by the challenge (even if only a 'by-product') to that image. Yet the subject who makes that protest is upset too that she has spoiled her dress: 'it was a new dress, it was becoming': 'becoming', it is both fashionably attractive, and, as fashions do, it is a sign which is changing. As I have argued, women's relation to their clothes as signs of 'power dressing', and to their

gender performances, are still heavily compromised by their objectification as sexual objects of the male gaze. This is the 'black-browed thing[']s' very frustration: the beautiful object is also the angry subject. Nevertheless, their meaning can be altered as long as power structures are pressured into change by the articulating of other views. For the narrator the dress is 'expensive': in economic and psychological terms. Her writing will be sacrificed or at least compromised by the desire to buy more beautiful dresses, which she wants and does not want. Writing out the confusion comes to be a way of venting anger, of expressing frustrated desires, even if they are manifested as 'silent rage'; and writing is also a way of finding, asserting a place whose pleasure is in its discovery of difference.

West once remarked that she was 'mortified to find how little I can claim to possess such a thing as a novelist's voice' but felt that the apprehension of art as something by which one could make sense of existence and human life 'does something to get one the voice of the novelist. It is equivalent to voice production'.⁴ West's texts perform in different voices; feminist readings can relish their performances, discovering the illusion of disembodied authority: the myth of an authority beyond the text.

Notes

Where full bibliographic details are not given, please refer to main bibliography.

Foreword

1. Victoria Glendinning, *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.1.
2. Rebecca West, in A.L. Rowse, 'Rebecca West; H.G.Wells', in *Memories and Glimpses* (London, 1986), pp.385-416 (pp.394-95).
3. Mary Jacobus, in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, pp.63-64.

1. Rebecca West and the cultural/textual contexts of authority

1. Rebecca West, 'The Art of Scepticism', *Vogue*, p.168.
2. Victoria Glendinning, Afterword to *Sunflower*, p.276.
3. Leslie Garis, interview, 'Rebecca West and H.G. Wells: After Sixty Years a Love Affair Still Rankles', *Sydney Morning Herald*, p.54.
4. Robert Towers, 'A Generous Sampling', *New York Times Book Review*, pp.14,34.
5. A.S. Byatt, 'A Good Mind at Work Observing Clever Women', *The Times*, p.13.
6. Mary Jacobus, in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, p.59.

7. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, pp.21-22.
8. See Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, p.188-90.
9. See Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, pp.163-71.
10. Rebecca West, 'Socialism in the Searchlight', *Daily Chronicle* (6 November, 1916), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.390-92 (p.392).
11. See, for example, Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, pp.203, 216-24; Lucy Bland, 'Purity, Motherhood, Pleasure or Threat?: Definitions of Female Sexuality 1900-1970s', in *Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions*, edited by Susan Cartledge and Joanna Ryan (London, 1983), pp.8-29; Renate Bridenthal, 'The Family: The View from a Room of her Own', in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, edited by B. Thorne and M. Yalom (New York, 1982), pp.225-39; John R. Gillis, *For Better for Worse: British Marriages 1600 to the Present* (Oxford, 1985), pp.229-321; Jane Lewis, 'Public Institution and Private Relationship: Marriage and Marriage Guidance, 1920-1968', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1, 3 (1990) pp.233-63.
12. Brian Connell, interview, 'Dame Rebecca West', *The Times*, p.7.
13. That women today are, in addition, also still regularly 'absent' citizens in terms of their needs and demands in health and welfare issues, in work, employment and training, and in childcare arrangements, was noted in a recent newspaper article. Preliminary findings of the 1991 Census illustrate that 'many statistics vital to women's lives, and to any current or future policies affecting them, simply do not exist'. Roz Morris, 'Learning by Numbers', *Guardian* (24 July, 1991), p.17.

14. Rebecca West, 'The Fool and the Wise Man' (review of Hall Caine, *The Woman Thou Gavest Me* and H.G. Wells, *The Passionate Friends*), *New Freewoman* (1 October, 1913), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.84-85.

15. Michelene Wandor, discussing actresses and the theatre in the latter half of the nineteenth century, remarks how 'many actresses were instrumental in producing and performing Ibsen's plays, both because of the ideas about women and independence with which he dealt, and because it gave them opportunities as actresses to play more challenging roles'.

Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics (London, 1981), p.9.

16. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.32.

17. The film tells the story of John Reed, the American Communist and journalist, who was in Petrograd during the Russian Revolution of 1917. He recorded his experiences in his book, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919). After being expelled from the U.S. Socialist Convention in 1919, he organised the left-wing splinter group of the movement into the Communist Labour Party. In 1919 he returned to the U.S.S.R., where he worked in the department of propaganda. He died of typhus in 1920 and was buried in the Kremlin.

Reds, dramatising Reed's experiences, was released in 1981; Warren Beatty won that year's Academy Award for Best Director; he also co-wrote the script and played the part of John Reed. West appeared in the film, as one of the real-life witnesses, recounting her memories of Reed, Emma Goldman *et al.*

18. West to editor of *Who's Who*, 14 July, 1982 (copy in Tulsa), in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.102.

19. West succeeded in preventing the publication of the novel in Britain during her lifetime. It was published in New York in 1955, and in London for the first time in 1984.

20. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar include Rebecca West among those women whom they suggest changed their names 'to rid themselves of or transform

the patronymic'. See *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, p.242.

21. Henrik Ibsen, *Romersholm*, in *Plays: Three* (*Romersholm, The Lady from the Sea, Little Eyolf*), translated by Michael Meyer (London, 1980), p.88 and p.89.

22. See Rebecca West, *Family Memories*, pp.218-220.

23. Rebecca West, *Family Memories*, p.31.

24. Rebecca West, 'Marriage' (review of H.G. Wells, *Marriage*), *Freewoman* (19 September, 1912), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.64-69.

25. For a reading of 'Indissoluble Matrimony', see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land*, pp.96-100.

Glendinning refers to 'Indissoluble Matrimony' as West's first published short story. But pieces such as 'Nana' and 'At Valladolid' had been published the year before in *The New Freewoman*; they represent 'fictionalised facts' drawn from West's own experience. 'Nana' is a descriptive study, set in a cafe in Seville. (West had been taken to Spain by her mother in 1913, to try to distract her from developing her relationship with Wells). The narrative relishes, as does 'Indissoluble Matrimony', in the depiction of the pride of female sensuality and physicality. 'At Valladolid' is narrated in the first person by a young woman who has made two suicide attempts to escape the problems besetting her. West later described this story as 'an externalization of internal events in my life'. She was referring to her unsuccessful time at drama school, and her distress at Wells' initial reluctance to embark on a relationship with her. See *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.48.

26. Rebecca West, 1900, p.50.

27. Rebecca West ghost wrote *War Nurse: The True Story of a Woman Who Lived, Loved and Suffered on the Western Front*, for a serial in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1926; it appeared under her own name. Later the

story was republished in book form; West had her name removed from the title page and shared the profits with the nurse whose story she had told.

The story, set largely in Paris, and told matter-of-factly in the first person by an American nurse, Corinne Andrews, is mostly of interest for its account of a middle-class woman's role in the workforce of the 1914-18 war. It also produces an illustrative account of the shifting tides of sexual mores, female sexuality, and male / female relations against a destabilised cultural background of traditional propriety and public convention.

28. See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p.168.

29. Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*, p.105.

30. Jacqueline Rose, 'Femininity and its Discontents', *Feminist Review*, p.9.

31. Rivers Scott, interview, 'Women's Lib and Why I'm For It', *Sunday Telegraph*, p.6.

West also treats Freud satirically in her review of Eva Figes' *Patriarchal Attitudes*. 'Freud preached that all little girls felt deprived and envious because they had not the same sexual organs as the male. When it was objected that many little girls knew nothing about the male sexual organs, he claimed that there was a bush telegraph in the unconscious which carried the news to the little girls.' See 'Aren't Men Beasts', *Sunday Telegraph*, p.10.

It was Juliet Mitchell's argument in the mid-1970s, in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, that Freud's theories can be read *productively* as descriptive not prescriptive of sexuality in culture that opened up an exciting era of relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis.

32. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Volume I, p.437.

West makes similar remarks elsewhere, linking revolutionary passion to the 'primal fires of our nature, our first loves and hates ... At that stage the parents are the environment, they are authority; and the

conception of environment and authority are coloured throughout our adult lives with the unrestrained emotions of cooing and squalling infancy.' While most individuals come to reconcile their own needs with that of society, 'there are those who never persuade the love and hatred they feel for their parents to sign a truce; and these often find themselves compelled to spend their lives in love and hatred of the society of which they are a part, striving to make it more beautiful and noble, but insisting that the prerequisite of its reform is its destruction'. 'The Revloutionary', in *The Meaning of Treason*, p.127.

33. Quoted in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.18.

34. Rebecca West to Lettie, summer, 1927, in *Rebecca West: A Life*, pp.112-13.

35. Peter Wolfe, *Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker*, p.98 and p.31.

36. Harold Orel, 'Rebecca West', *English Literature in Transition*, p.450.

37. See Samuel Hynes, 'In Communion with Reality', *Times Literary Supplement*, pp.1553-55.

38. Rebecca West had made a signed request that Glendinning should write a short biography of her. She asked that Stanley Olson should write a full one. However Olson suffered a stroke which prevented him from embarking on the work.

39. Rebecca West, 'The Position of Women in Indian Life' (review of Maharani of Baroda and S.M. Mitra, *The Position of Women in Indian Life*), *Freewoman* (30 November, 1911), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.12-14.

40. Shoshana Felman, 'To Open the Question', *Yale French Studies*, p.8.

41. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author', p.159.

42. See, for example, her essay, 'The Novel as Polylogue', in *Desire in Language*, pp.159-209.

Toril Moi gives a lucid account of Kristeva's position with regard to the meaning of the feminine, marginality and their shifting place(s) in language and culture. See *Sexual / Textual Politics*, pp.150-73.

43. Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, p.193-94.

44. Rivers Scott, interview, 'Women's Lib and Why I'm For It', *Sunday Telegraph*, p.6.

45. Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, p.188.

46. Leslie Garis, interview, 'Rebecca West and H.G. Wells: After Sixty Years a Love Affair Still Rankles', *Sydney Morning Herald*, p.54.

47. Michelene Vandor, questioning Glendinning's use of the term 'radical feminist' to describe West in the Afterword to *Sunflower*, redefined West as 'a bourgeois radical feminist, an irresolvable contradiction in terms'. See her review of *Sunflower*, 'Submissive women and ugly men: Rebecca West's Unfinished Story', *The Listener*, p.27. The difficulty inherent in naming or labelling underline the contradictions of challenge and conformity which describe West's position.

48. Rebecca West to Victoria Glendinning, 1 November, 1975, in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.136.

49. Letter to Ethel Smyth, 11 July, 1933, in Virginia Woolf, *The Sickly Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Volume V, 1932-35 (London, 1979), p.204.

50. Letter to Vita Sackville-West, 19 August, 1939, in Virginia Woolf, *Leave the Letters Till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Volume VI, 1936-41 (London, 1980), p.351.

51. Rebecca West, *Family Memories*, p.90.

52. See Jacqueline Rose, Introduction II, *Feminine Sexuality*: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne, edited by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, pp.27-57, especially p.50.

53. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.112.

54. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.110.

55. See a print of this drawing and the accompanying note in *The Young Rebecca*, picture no.9.

In the late 1920s West wrote an essay ridiculing Beerbohm's dislike of 'literary ladies', and his belief that women should just concentrate on looking beautiful, rather than 'pursue an aesthetic aim that we could never realise'. See 'Max Beerbohm', in *Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log*, pp.66-74 (p.69).

Sandra M. Gilbert offers some interesting observations on the function of costume as metaphor during the period of modernism. See 'Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature', *Critical Inquiry*, pp.391-417.

56. Joan Rivière, 'Womanliness as Masquerade', pp.35-44 (p.38).

Stephen Heath makes an astute commentary on and summary of Rivière's essay: 'to be a woman is to dissimulate a fundamental masculinity, femininity is that dissimulation'. See Stephen Heath, 'Joan Rivière and the Masquerade', pp.45-61 (p.49).

57. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.237.

58. C.G. Jung, 'Woman in Europe', p.116.

59. Rebecca West, *St Augustine*, p.179.

60. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Volume I, pp.175-76.

61. Rebecca West, *St Augustine*, p.180.

62. *Rebecca West: A Life*, pp.144-45.
63. Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, p.200.
64. See Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, pp.37-55 (p.47).
65. Nancy K. Miller, 'Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction', in *The New Feminist Criticism*, edited by Elaine Showalter, pp.339-60 (p.357).
66. See Bonnie Kime's Scott's commentary on West's rendering of female nurture versus male destruction. 'The Strange Necessity of Rebecca West', pp.280-81.
For a humorous treatment of women's restorative powers, or 'miraculous healing', see West's short story, 'Ruby'.
67. Rebecca West, 'The Sin of Self-Sacrifice', *Clarion* (12 December, 1913), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.235-238 (p.235).
68. George Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, translated by Mary Dalwood (San Francisco, 1986), p.87.
69. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Volume II, p.298.
70. In 1933, West described as 'fatuous', 'those of the Left Wing who have thrown the whole tradition of economic idealism out of the window and babble of nothing but Russia. Some of them may be excused for talking as if all ideas of social and economic equality had been invented by the Bolsheviks by the circumstance that they were not Socialists before 1914. But they cannot be excused for their lickerish liking of the harsh effort of Russia'. *A Letter to a Grandfather*, p.35.
71. Rebecca West, letter to J.B. Priestley, 22 June 1955 (held in Tulsa), quoted in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.215.

72. Rebecca West, 'Hiss Case Hid Graver Issue', *Sunday Times* (22 March, 1953), p.4.

This is the first of Rebecca West's series of four articles, 'Behind the Witch Hunts', in the *Sunday Times*. The remaining three are: 'The Surprising Mr Kaplan' (29 March, 1953), p.4; 'The Terrified Teacher' (5 April, 1953), p.2; 'McCarthy the Demagogue' (12 April, 1953), p.4.

73. Rebecca West, *The New Meaning of Treason*, p.361.

74. Jane Gallop's view expresses this position. She comments that 'infidelity is a feminist practice of undermining the Name of the Father. The unfaithful reading strays from the author, the authorised, produces that which does not hold as a reproduction, as a representation'. *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, p.48.

2. Telling stories: narrating, covering, discovering

1. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, p.129.

2. Rebecca West, 'Woman as Artist and Thinker', p.381.

3. Marina Warner, interview, 'Rebecca West', p.18.

4. Rebecca West, 'The Strange Necessity', in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews*, p.70.

5. Rebecca West, 'The Long Chain of Criticism', in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews*, p.265.

6. Annette Kolodny, 'Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of Feminist Literary Criticism', in *The New Feminist Criticism*, edited by Elaine Showalter, p.144-67 (p.153).

7. Catherine Belsey, 'Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text', p.53.

8. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p.161.

9. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p.7.

10. The revolutionary qualities attributed to modernist writing, and its undermining of the assumed extant authorities of text and reader respectively, is now frequently linked with the feminist challenge to patriarchy, and with the subversive elements discernible in the practice of feminist reading/writing. Recently, West's own early writing - fiction and journalism - has been included in the project of reappropriating modernism as an expression of the conflict of gender, and to foreground the sheer volume of hitherto obscured women's writing of the early twentieth century. See, for example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, pp.96-100; Bonnie Kime Scott, 'Rebecca West', pp.560-68.

11. Rebecca West, 'The Strange Necessity', in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews*, p.198.

West's comments here are illustrative of the importance art holds for her as a source of pleasure. In this essay the pleasure is conceived of as quasi-sexual. The analogy she draws between the 'phases' of love between men and women and the 'intense exaltation which comes to our knowledge of the gr^eatest works of art', not only suggests the physical sensation of consum(mat)ing pleasure, or 'the orgasm ... of the artistic instinct', but also offers an insight into the splits-in-the-union processes constituting her own texts. Here art represents the gratification of desire in its construction of a unity. The word 'phase', however, suggests the temporality and transience of a mythical unity held together by concentration on an aspect of the text; this, in turn, presupposes the omission of other aspects that would loosen that hold. See pp.196-97.

One critic explains West's use of physical and sexual tropes in her criticism, as 'a conscious attempt to obliterate aesthetic distance - to

escape the confines of critical language'. See Maggie Humm, 'Rebecca West', p.165.

12. Barbara Johnson aptly sums up the term *unknown* as I use it here. 'The unknown is not what lies beyond the limits of knowledge, some unreachable, sacred, ineffable point towards which we vainly yearn. It lies, rather, in the oversights and slip-ups that structure our lives in the same way that *x* makes it possible to articulate an algebraic equation'. *The Critical Difference*, p.xii.

13. In her travelogue of the Balkans, West wrote that 'life is most apt to repeat a design and fall into a pattern when it is weak and diseased. When it is powerful and healthy it is always unpredictable'. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Volume II, p.256.

14. Compare Mary Jacobus' comments. 'The woman under patriarchy is caught in an unavoidably hysterical dilemma. She can either submit to the desire of the father, identifying herself with it so completely that she becomes what he desires her to be; that is all body, the fetish who veils the horror of absence in the male hysterical fantasy which (as Freud admits) afflicts all men in the face of their mothers. This is why, for the hysteric, the death of the father fractures the system of representations in which she has taken up her assigned position. Alternatively, a woman can break with the desire of the father by choosing to be "like himself", instead of what he likes. This means, for the writer and actress, being at once self-supporting and self-estranged, haunted by the father's repressed castration anxiety, for ever retelling his forgotten story'. *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, p.274.

15. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p.185.

16. Terry Lovell describes the subversive literary text under capitalism in the nineteenth century as one which 'must give pleasure to a female readership while at the same time disturbing the foundations of that pleasure'. The response which such a text arouses is comparable to the experience of reading West's fictional texts. See *Consuming Fiction*, p.71.

17. Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, pp.193-94.
18. Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses', *Screen*, p.12.
19. West wrote that artists - writers, painters, musicians - refuse to 'alter their conclusions to make them serviceable to any current view which makes an attempt to explain life. They follow a purpose yet deny that purpose'. 'The Strange Necessity', in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews*, p.148.
20. Rebecca West, 'And They all Lived Unhappily Ever After', p.464.
Iris Murdoch's fiction is characterised by a tight formalism; like West, however, absolute endings to her texts are refused.
21. Toril Moi, expounding Kristeva's reading of femininity, comments that 'women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will ... share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God. In the first instance, the borderline is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness outside, and in the second it is seen as an inherent part of the inside: the part that protects and shields the symbolic order from imaginary chaos'. *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.167.
22. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Volume II, p.544.
23. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*, especially pp.45-92.
24. Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix*, p.154.
25. Rebecca West, 'Woman as Artist and Thinker', p.381.

26. Nancy K. Miller, 'Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, p.357.

27. Ronald Hayman, 'Rebecca West in Interview', *Books and Bookmen*, p.8.

28. I decided to include a reading of one of West's short stories from the collection entitled *The Harsh Voice*, on the basis that 'The Abiding Vision' constitutes (in miniature - in bold colour) many of the issues relevant to my discussion of her longer fiction.

The remaining three stories in the collection are variously concerned with the failure of men and women to communicate meaningfully or satisfactorily with each other. 'Life Sentence' focuses on the impossibility of a compulsive male / female relationship based on the inextricable intertwining of love and hate. 'There is No Conversation' relates the development of a relationship based on a mutual misunderstanding of a financially successful American woman and a French businessman. 'Salt of the Earth' satirises the egotistical behaviour of a woman whose misplaced sense of duty and responsibility towards her family and friends has ultimately murderous consequences.

29. Rebecca West to Sylvia Lynd, 31 August, 1929, in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.126.

30. Rebecca West, Introduction to Harriet Cohen, *A Bundle of Time*, quoted in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.126.

31. Rebecca West to her sister, Winnie, 1929, quoted in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.126.

32. Tony Redd, in his PhD thesis on West, complains of *Harriet Hume's* lack of 'clarity of plot that a work of fiction must have if its meaning is to be readily understood by even very intelligent readers'. 'Rebecca West: Master of Reality', pp.86-87.

33. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p.48.

34. If the eponymous character's forename is taken from West's friend, Harriet Cohen, then perhaps her surname makes an appropriate link with David Hume, the Scottish philosopher (1711-76). He argued that perceptions of the mind were essentially impressions, emotions and ideas. Piers Aubrey in *The Fountain Overflows* expounds and supports Hume's arguments: 'nobody has ever upset his contention that there is no logical proof that because certain causes produce a certain effect on one occasion they are bound to produce it on another' (FO, 114-15). This unpredictability names the unstable 'placing' of Harriet Hume in the text.

35. The notion of woman's intuition which West treats playfully in *Harriet Hume*, she considers in her journalism as 'this meaningless chatter ... due to the duplicity of women'. See 'The Nature of Woman' (review of Dr Lionel Taylor, *The Nature of Woman*), *Clarion* (17 March, 1913), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp. 161-66 (p. 163).

36. Jefferson Hunter comments on the supposed parallels between Roman and Edwardian imperialism, and the Edwardians' fear that their own age might be guilty of the same physical and moral degeneracy. See *Edwardian Fiction*, p. 135.

The Edwardian period was one in which the interest in phenomena beyond the so-called scientific developed considerably. The Society for Psychical Research was founded in Cambridge in 1882. Samuel Hynes describes how psychic research appealed to a need that was essentially religious - recovering a sense of meaning in the universe that was lost when Darwinism challenged and undermined Christianity. See *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, p. 138.

37. Victoria Glendinning, Introduction to *Harriet Hume*.

38. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 76.

Shoshana Felman's comments in her reading of Balzac's 'The Girl with the Golden Eyes', are comparable. Here she shows how 'femininity inhabits masculinity, inhabits it as otherness, as its own disruption'. 'Rereading Femininity', *Yale French Studies*, p. 42.

39. Mary Ellmann criticises West's tendency to essentialise gender. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, West allocates the labels of idiot and lunatic to women and men respectively. Women, she argues, focus exclusively on their private lives, while men are obsessed by public affairs. See *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Volume I, p.3. Ellmann is also critical of the reverential stance West assumes towards her husband, Henry Andrews in the narrative of the travelogue. 'Here, on their visit to Yugoslavia in 1937, Miss West and her husband neatly divide their touristical duties. The Ballast [Andrews] thinks sound, solid, careful thoughts wherever he goes, his mind carries a knapsack full of precise and irrefutable facts ... Meanwhile the Balloon [West] appreciates, her working day is given over to piercing perceptions and lightning intuitions'. *Thinking About Women*, pp.114-15.

In Harriet Hume, however, West's uses of essentialist gender principles is undoubtedly an ironic strategy.

40. Samuel Hynes, 'In Communion with Reality', *Times Literary Supplement*, p.1553.

41. Rebecca West, 'The Duty of Harsh Criticism', *New Republic*, p.18.

42. In a letter to the Observer in 1928, West, wrote in response to St. John Ervine's criticism of John van Druten's dramatised version of *The Return of the Soldier*. The critic had commented in his review that West's novel 'was written at a time when London's intellectuals were suffering from the first impact upon their minds of the Herren Jung and Freud, and were inclined to believe that a solution to all our ills could be found in psychoanalysis Miss West's novel was, in brief, a modern Tract for the Times; it was brilliant journalism'. West responds by claiming that her novel has 'fundamentally nothing to do with psychoanalysis. I introduced a psycho-analyst as an unimportant device'. She goes on, however, to explain how she has since spent eight months studying this, 'one of the most important sciences', and rebukes her critic for 'this chatter against psycho-analysis'. See 'On The Return of the Soldier', *Yale University Library Gazette*, pp.68-70.

43. Claire M. Tylee criticises West's first novel for its treatment of relations between women as being essentially hostile, for apparently sanctioning an unhappy marriage and bourgeois respectability, and for expressing no challenge to the First World War itself. See Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings 1914-64* (London, 1990), pp.144-50,181-83.

44. Rebecca West, 'Spinsters and Art' (review of H.A. Hinkson, *The Considine Luck*, H. Wales, *The Spinster*, and D.H Lawrence, *The Trespassers*), *Freewoman* (11 July, 1912), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.42-47 (p.46).

West was accused of treating the notion of spinster pejoratively. She defended her use of the term, claiming that she did not mean it as 'necessarily a feminine quality. It is simply the limitation of experience to one's own sex and consequently the regard of the other sex from an idealistic point of view. My reference to the spinster ... made it plain that spinsterhood implied a segregation from the opposite sex.' 'Letter to the Editor of *The Freewoman*', *Freewoman* (1 August, 1912), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.47-49 (p.48).

45. West had earlier spoken out against those writers who indulge in 'spiritual picnics over the orgies and ailments of the poor'. In her own fictional treatment of the character of Margaret, she comes dangerously close to committing the folly she complains against. See 'Views and Vagabonds' (review of Rose Macaulay, *Vagabonds*), *Freewoman* (21 March, 1912), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.25-28 (p.27).

46. Philip E. Ray's argument that *The Judge* can more satisfactorily be read as a Gothic romance is unconvincing. His formulaic reading of the narrative precludes the significant meanings of history and (con)textuality. See his essay, 'The Judge Reexamined: Rebecca West's Underrated Gothic Romance', *English Literature in Transition*, pp.297-307.

47. Jane Miller remarks that *The Judge* becomes 'quite simply Jocasta's story', dealing with 'the implications of the Oedipus complex, and the

traditions which have fed it, for a woman'. See *Women Writing About Men* (London, 1986), pp.115-21 (p.116).

48. Hugh MacDiarmid, the Scottish modernist writer, in a review cum fictional dialogue, posits a perspective which criticises *The Judge* for what it perceives as West's prettifying and romanticising treatment of Edinburgh and its people. Her fault is, it seems, her sex: 'It'll tak a *man* tae write aboot Edinburgh as it sud be written aboot'. And, 'the verra last thing Scottish literature needs is *lady-fying*'. See 'Following Rebecca West in Edinburgh: A Monologue in the Vernacular', p.281, p.282.

49. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1979), p.494. [First published 1860]

50. See Victoria Glendinning's Afterword to *Sunflower*, p.275.

51. Victoria Glendinning, Afterword to *Sunflower*, p.273.

52. Rebecca West, *Family Memories*, p.207-8.

53. Christa Wolf, *A Model Childhood* (London, 1983), p.27

54. See the Afterword to *Cousin Rosamund* for West's synopsis of the whole saga.

55. Rosalind Coward, 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, pp.225-239 (p.235).

56. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.229.

Samuel Hynes' remark that *The Birds Fall Down* is West's 'most completely imagined novel, perhaps because it is the one that is farthest from the particulars of her own experience', therefore seems misplaced. See 'In Communion with Reality', *Times Literary Supplement*, p.1554.

57. In the Foreword to *The Birds Fall Down*, West wrote that 'students of modern history will recognise the necessity for specifying that [the train] was moving. The Armistice which ended the First World War was signed in a stationary train'.

See also West's short story published in 1952, 'Deliverance', whose narrative, also set in a moving train, centres on a female secret agent; the themes echo those of *The Birds Fall Down*.

58. West inverts the place of treachery in her fictionalised rendering. In the historic account, Ievno Aseff, head of the terrorist wing of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, was exposed as a police agent. In *The Birds Fall Down*, Kamensky, an apparently loyal tsarist, is revealed as a revolutionary. His act of treachery is thus presented as having been committed against the (legitimate?) tsardom.

59. In 'Mr Setty and Mr Hume', West comments that: 'the position of man is extremely insecure unless he can find out what is happening around him. That is why historians publicly pretend that they can give an exact account of events in the past, though they privately know that all the past will let us know about events above a certain degree of importance is a bunch of alternative hypotheses. but they find such hypotheses'. *A Train of Powder*, p.241.

60. The epigraph which prefaces the novel images this idea graphically:

We are all bowmen in this place.
The pattern of the birds against the sky
Our arrows overprint and then they die.
But it is also common to our race
That when the birds fall down we weep.
Reason's a thing we dimly see in sleep.

The poet, Conway Power, is Rebecca West. She wrote under another pseudonym too: Richard Wynn Errington. A few lines of his verse preface *The Harsh Voice*.

Speaks the harsh voice
We hear when money talks, or hate,
Then comes the softest answer.

None of West's other poetry was published.

61. Nevertheless, Mary Ellmann takes a different approach to the text, suggesting that in her interest in creating 'the illusion of security', West's narrative voice controls the reader's response, manoeuvring her into some dubious and naive judgemental positions. Ellmann doesn't appear to credit the significance of the contradictory perspectives offered. See 'The Russians of Rebecca West', *Atlantic Monthly*, pp.68-71.

62. The separation is later marked by Laura's realisation that she can't tell Tania about Kamensky, since her mother would use the information as an 'excuse for running to her husband as if he were still her husband, and annulling that goodbye' (*BFD*, 366).

63. Rebecca West, 'The Voice of the Novelist', BBC Radio 3 talk.

64. Jane Austen, *Emma* (London, 1971), p.440 [first published London, 1816]

65. For an interesting account of the development and meaning of the bourgeoisie in France - a convention and style gone stale - see Theodore Zeldin, *France 1848-1945*, Volume I (Oxford, 1973), pp.11-22.

66. See the Introduction to *The Thinking Reed*, p.v.

67. West wrote that 'art is so much fuller of perfection than life'. The satiety of art - its fullness - exceeds itself, making unstable its position of wisdom, of knowledge. See 'Spinsters and Art' (review of H.A. Hinkson, *The Considine Luck*, H. Wales, *The Spinster*, D.H. Lawrence, *The Trespasser*), *Freewoman* (11 July, 1912), pp.42-47 (p.45).

68. Rebecca West, 'Trees of Gold', p.570.

69. Rebecca West, 'High Fountain of Genius', p.592.

70. Rebecca West, *Family Memories*, p.219.

71. 'The Strange Necessity', in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews*, p.33.
72. Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader*, p.102.
73. Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, p.28.
74. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p.7 and p.38.
75. West to unknown recipient, from Porlock, 1922, in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.81.
76. H.G. Wells, *H.G. Wells in Love*, p.102.
77. Rebecca West, 'Notes on Novels', *New Statesman*, p.394.
78. Letter to Rebecca West from Somerset Maugham, 1922, in *Rebecca West: A Life*, pp.81-82.
79. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1979) p.209.
80. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p.48.
81. Here, there is an obvious connection with the Lawrentian notion of the man or woman uncorrupted by a 'civilising' culture.
82. Jacques Lacan, 'The Subject and the Other: Alienation', in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p.211.
83. Julia Kristeva, 'The Novel as Polylogue', in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, p.167.

3. Relations of power: figuring authority in the texts

1. Victoria Glendinning also quotes these words verbatim from West's then unpublished memoirs. See *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.23. The words do not appear in the edited text published as *Family Memories*.
2. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, p.191.
3. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.23.
4. See Patricia Vaugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, p.75.
5. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.208.
6. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.113.
7. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.208.
8. R D Laing, *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays* (London, 1971), pp.3-19 (p.3).
9. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, p.182.
10. Nellie Furman discusses the literary text as a marital contract, where the wife's infidelity or the mother's repudiation of the father's word would amount to the denial of patriarchal rule. See 'The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle', in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, edited by Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, pp.59-79 (p.71).
11. The family's house moves are dependent on the word/whim of the father. On a metaphoric level, the position of the female subject under patriarchy is (dis)located according to its relation to the place of the father.
12. The character of Cordelia is based on West's own sister, Letitia. West's resentment of her is made explicit in her memoirs, where she remarks

that Lettie 'never ceased to convey to me that I was a revolting intruder in her home'. *Family Memories*, p.201. In the *Saga*, West reverses their roles. Letitia/Cordelia becomes the treacherous invader who destroys family unity.

13. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, p.153.

14. The possibility of the absolute presence of the subject is a humanist myth in any case. Further, as Derrida points out, 'to write is to know that the Book does not exist and that forever there are books, against which the meaning of a world not conceived by an absolute subject is shattered, before it has ever become a unique meaning'. *Writing and Difference* (London, 1978), p.10.

15. 'My Father', *Sunday Telegraph*, p.4.

16. Rosamund's prophetic words echo Paul's in the Bible. He writes to the Corinthians that while their forefathers tempted the wrath of God and suffered some destruction as a warning, these events 'were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come'. See I Corinthians, 10. 11.

17. The feeling of inevitability about the ultimate downward impulse of stocks and shares is likened to Piers' own suicidal impulse. Elsewhere, West treats this impulse as *native to men* - the will to die in them being stronger than the will to live. See 'Woman as Artist and Thinker', pp.378-79.

18. Laura's words recall John's in the Bible, when as he describes the vision of the new heaven and earth, 'the sea was no more'. See Revelations, 21. 1-2.

Both Rosamund and Laura can be read as subversive of the patriarchal order, and yet as feminists in danger of professing the new religion, which Julia Kristeva urges against. See 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, p.208. While the dismantling of traditional 'truths' is crucial, the affirmation of different positions must be provisional.

19. Jessica Benjamin warns that 'the danger of the position that sees identification with the mother as the source of femininity is that we will accept, even idealize, the deprivation to which women have been subjected'. 'A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space', in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, edited by Teresa de Lauretis, pp.78-101 (p.85).
20. Edith Wharton, *The Mother's Recompense* (London, 1986), p.104. [First published 1925.]
21. Donna C. Staunton, 'Difference on Trial: a Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva', p.173.
22. In *The Judge* (p.27), Richard is described in exactly the same words. The exoticism of the unknown lover is comparable to the mysteries of the distant father. Both represent the attractions of the unknown, a possibility, for the circumscribed female subject, of vicarious experience of the inaccessible.
23. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p.236.
24. In her journalism West upbraided those women who 'try to earn salvation quickly and simply by giving up their souls to pain. It may only be a further development of the sin of woman, the surrender of personality'. 'So Simple', *Freewoman* (12 October, 1912), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.70-74 (p.73).
25. Makiko Minow-Pinkney makes an explicit link between modernism, feminism and Lacan's notion of the Imaginary. 'Modernism may be seen as an attempt to reintroduce the repressed Imaginary into a symbolic order identified with an oppressive Victorianism by modern writers'. In this scheme, 'the revolt of the Imaginary is an attempt to retrieve the maternal'. *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, Sussex, 1987), p.15.
26. Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, p.206.

27. Rebecca West, 'Woman as Artist and Thinker', p.373.
28. Nancy K. Miller, 'Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, p.357.
29. Rebecca West, 'The Sin of Self-Sacrifice', *Clarion* (12 December, 1913), in *The Young Rebecca*, pp.235-38 (p.237).
30. Rivers Scott, interview, 'Women's Lib and Why I'm For It', *Sunday Telegraph*, p.6.
31. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1972).
32. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, translated by J.B. Baillie, second edition (London, 1931), pp.229-40 (p.234). [First published 1807.]

Jessica Benjamin lucidly contextualises the Hegelian argument in terms of sexual difference, and counters Hegel's notion of the inevitable domination / submission relation with one which allows for the *mutual* recognition between subjects. See *The Bonds of Love*, pp.51-84.
33. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, p.221.
34. Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, edited by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, pp.101-16 (p.102).
35. Irigaray urges women to refuse the sacrifice of their bodies, their words, their love, to a patriarchal order: 'If we play along, we let ourselves be abused, destroyed. We remain indefinitely distant from ourselves to support the pursuit of their ends'. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p.211.
36. Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, p.204

37. Rose Macaulay, *Told by an Idiot* (London, 1983), p. 248. [First published 1923.]

38. Rebecca West, *Family Memories*, p.203. Nevertheless, according to Glendinning, West's marrying of Henry Andrews (1930) was 'a need and a hope. She loved love and she had longed for the emotional security she felt she had lacked in her childhood and in her years with Wells. Though she had believed men to be "poor stuff" from her girlhood, a house without a man in it was to her incomplete'. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.238.

It is interesting too that when at first Henry explained that he couldn't marry Rebecca (because of lack of money) she felt 'as if I had been cast to act the star role opposite him in some important play', and had to ask him 'as an actress might enquire of a playwright' what the obstacle was. *Memoirs notebook* (in Tulsa), quoted in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.134.

39. See Nellie Furman, 'The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle', in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, edited by Gayle Greene and Koppélia Kahn, pp.59-79 (p.76).

40. Rebecca West, *Family Memories*, p.203.

41. Thomas Docherty, *On Modern Authority*, p.267.

42. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p.191.

43. See the Afterword to *Sunflower*, p. 276.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf suggests the complicity of women in this state of affairs. She argues that men have become 'great' partly because women have served as their looking glasses, 'reflecting the figure of a man at twice its natural size'. She goes on to rebuke 'Z', 'most humane, most modest of men', who, 'taking up some book by Rebecca West and reading a passage in it, exclaimed, "The arrant feminist! She says that men are snobs!" The exclamation, to me so surprising - for why was Miss West an arrant feminist for making a possibly true if uncomplimentary statement about the other sex? - was not merely the cry of wounded vanity;

it was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself'. *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (London, 1984), p.33.

44. West is preoccupied with this notion elsewhere. In a discussion of why there have been fewer 'great' women artists and thinkers than men, she remarks on how men vent their frustration at their own failings by treating women badly. 'Unfortunately, it happens to be the case that there is hardly an easier way for a man to still a troublesome inferiority complex than by bringing accusations against women. Should one feel that one is putting up a poor show against the hostile universe, it heartens one greatly if one can find some one who is putting up an even poorer show. Therefore, man insists on laying it down - and puts it as strongly as possible in order to convince himself - that women are putting up a poorer show than himself.... Abuse is rained on the female sex; and the cankering effect of this is greatly increased by the fact that it often has apparent authority behind it'. 'Woman as Artist and Thinker', p.374-75.

In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, she explains men's resentment of women as a sex, as arising from their own sense of insecurity about their mortality, and their pretence that 'men's physical superiority is the outward sign of a universal superiority'. In a society where women escape their position of slavery to men, the latter's sense of personal loss is acute. See *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Volume II, pp.47-50.

45. Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic and Modern*, p.44.

46. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Volume I, p.171.

47. Doris Lessing, like Rebecca West, seems to have come to regard any revolutionary activity as dubiously motivated. In a novel written in the mid-1980s, the satiric presentation of egoistic and dangerously ignorant modern-day communists is biting. Dorothy (Lessing's spokeswoman?), mother of the 'good terrorist', Alice, comments: 'No one bothers to ask any longer if it achieves anything, going on marches or demos, they talk about how they feel. That's what they care about. It's for kicks. It's for fun'. *The Good Terrorist* (London, 1985), p.335.

48. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, translated by S.W. Dyde (London, 1896), p.172. [First published 1821.]

49. The poem was first published in 1925. See T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London, 1974), pp.89-92 (p.90).

50. West wrote that mankind is perpetually holding a trial which is seeking to determine 'whether the God with whom man can have a perfect relationship is the dream of disappointed sons imagining a perfect Father who shall be better than all fathers, or is more real than reality'. *The New Meaning of Treason*, p.121.

51. West remarks that 'many men who would have been happy in the practice of religion during the ages of faith have in these modern times a need for participation in politics which is as strong as the need for food, for shelter, for sex'. *The New Meaning of Treason*, p.119.

52. Lacan makes the connection explicit in his discussion of the significance of the phallus, which 'can play its role only when veiled'. *Aufhebung*, of which the phallus is the signifier, is initiated by the latter's disappearance. See *Ecrits*, p.288.

53. Marshall Berman, *All that's Solid Melts into Air*, (London, 1983) p.255.

54. Rebecca West, *A Letter to a Grandfather*, p.6.

55. Bertolt Brecht, *Selected Poems*, translated by H.R. Hays (New York, 1959), p.83. The poem is from Brecht's play, *Roundheads and Peakheads*. It was completed in 1933 (the year West's *A Letter to a Grandfather* appeared), though it wasn't published in English until 1935 in *The International Theatre*.

56. Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix*, p.14.

57. Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix*, p.16.

58. For a similar treatment of a woman's shrewdness in managing financial affairs, (learned through her own experience of perceiving herself as a commodity) see West's short story, 'Sideways'.

59. Throughout *The Thinking Reed* there are powerful echoes of the themes of D.H. Lawrence's novel of 1916, *Women in Love*. In her 1930 *Elegy* to Lawrence, West praised his method of expressing himself 'in symbolic terms', and remarks how he 'felt the urgency to describe the unseen so keenly that he has rifled the seen of its vocabulary and diverted it to that purpose'. *Elegy*, p.393.

60. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, pp.179-80.

61. Michelene Wandor reads Sunflower's desire for passivity as the 'hope of a kind of ultimate submission', which overwhelms 'any sense of striving for female independence', likening it to Lawrence's reactionary views on female destiny. See her review of the *Sunflower* text, 'Submissive Women and Ugly Men: Rebecca West's Unfinished Story', *The Listener*, p.27. I agree with her comments as far as Sunflower's expression of desire is concerned. The power of the narrator's (West's) imagery, however, challenges the singular fate of her character's (un)desirable story.

4. Feminine/feminist: looking at issues of identity

1. Rebecca West, 'Boswell Unashamed', *Sunday Telegraph*, p.12.
2. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Volume I, p.215.
3. Marina Warner, 'Rebecca West', interview, p.9.
4. Mary Jacobus, 'Reading Woman (Reading)', in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, p.4.
5. See Jacqueline Rose, Introduction II, in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, edited by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline

Rose, p.32.

6. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.25.

7. Rebecca West to Sylvia Lynd, from Villa Mysto, Summer 1929, in *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.127.

8. Jung's conception of anima and animus can be compared to this attitude. In Jung's writing the anima, the feminine principle, makes up for the lack in the masculine consciousness, the animus (in the woman these principles are reversed). With Jung, the man's Otherness (anima) is prioritised, but only insofar as it corresponds to the Otherness of masculinity. See 'Anima and Animus', pp.186-211.

But it is the two (or more) in one that makes the irreducible difference, the impossibility of a strict separation.

9. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p.181.

10. Rebecca West, 'A Novelist's Dilemma', *The Booklover*, p.5.

11. Harold Orel, *The Literary Achievement of Rebecca West*, p.130.

12. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p.47.

13. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p.47.

14. Stephen Heath, 'Joan Riviere and the Masquerade', p.54

15. Rosemary Betterton, 'Introduction' in *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and the Media*, edited by Rosemary Betterton, p.13.

16. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Problem of the Actor', in *The Gay Science* (New York, 1974), p.317. [First published 1887.]

17. Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, pp.10-11.

18. See the Afterword to *Sunflower*, pp.274-75.

19. In a review article of 1922, West quotes lines from Rose Macaulay's *Mystery at Geneva*, which may well have inspired her own words in the *Sunflower* manuscript: 'Women are, inherently and with no activities on their part, News, in a way that men are not... All sorts of articles and letters appear in the papers about women. profound questions are raised concerning them. Should they smoke? Should they work? Vote? Take orders? Marry? Exist? Are not their skirts too short, or their sleeves? Have they a sense of humour, of honour, of direction? Are spinsters superfluous? But how seldom similar enquiries are propounded about men. How few persons discuss superfluous bachelors, or whether the male arm or leg is an immodest sight, or whether men should vote. For men are not news'. See 'Notes on Novels', *New Statesman*, p.270.

Both Macaulay and West prefigure themes later treated by Sylvia Plath in her novel of 1963, *The Bell Jar*.

20. *Rebecca West: A Life*, p.116.

James Joyce, indignant at his novel, *Ulysses*, being referred to in West's essay, 'The Strange Necessity', alongside her allusions to shopping for clothes in Paris, got his own back with barbed references to her throughout his later novel, *Finnegan's Wake*. See Rebecca West, 'The Strange Necessity', in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews*, pp.13-198.

21. Nicola Jeal, 'Fit to Bust', *Observer Magazine*, 9 June 1991, pp.24-27 (p.25).

22. Ros Coward, 'Madonna on Marilyn's Perilous Peroxide Path', *Observer*, 5 May, 1991, p.52.

23. Bowlby argues that the consumer is more possessed by commodities than in possession of them. 'What is by definition one's own, one's very identity or individuality, is at the same time something which has to be

put on, acted or worn as an external appendage, owned as a property nominally apart from the bodily self'. *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, p.28.

24. Stephen Heath, 'Womanliness as Masquerade', p.52.

25. Stephen Heath summarises the predicament. 'Women faint, lose their senses, burst into tears, are desperate and feverish: female behaviour. Man's identity depends upon it, he needs the *opposite* sex as guarantee of his. But then in return there is the risk in the opposite, the other; man's being is fringed with darkness, the menace and unknown of the female'. *The Sexual Fix*, p.27.

26. Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today*, p.16.

27. Ethyl Spector Person, 'Sexuality as the Mainstay of Identity: Psychoanalytic Perspectives', *Signs*, p.627.

28. Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, p.28.

29. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p.114.

30. Roland Barthes distinguishes between the two. A work is 'displayed'; it 'can be seen'. By contrast a text is 'demonstrated'; it is 'a process of demonstration'. *Image-Music-Text*, pp.156-57.

31. One can, however, think of examples of female statuary, such as the Virgin Mary, to which offerings are sacrificed. Such monuments, however, are themselves the (dis)embodiment of an already achieved sacrifice.

32. Rebecca West, 'The Freewoman', p.576.

33. Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic and Modern*, p.36.

34. Rosemary Jackson's discussion of features which characterise the fiction of fantasy, comments that 'a fantasy of physical fragmentation corresponds ... to a breakdown of rational unity. That linguistic order which creates and constitutes a whole self, a whole body is undone'. See *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, p.90.
35. 'Two interviews with Julia Kristeva', *Partisan Review*, pp.131-32.
36. Julia Kristeva, Preface to *Desire in Language*, p.x.
37. Roland Barthes describes this 'answer' offered by music as the 'imaginary in music whose function is to reassure, to constitute the subject hearing it'. *Image-Music-Text*, p.179.

Conclusions

1. The manuscripts of the short story are held in the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa. There are several draft versions, and scattered draft fragments of the story. The one from which I quote is the latest draft, typed by Diana Stainforth, West's secretary.
2. Rebecca West, 'The World's Worst Failure', p.582.
3. Rebecca West, 'The World's Worst Failure', p.583.
4. Rebecca West, 'The Novelist's Voice', BBC Radio 3 talk.

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The bibliography below is selective, although all West's collected fiction is included. A number of her uncollected essays, reviews and short stories is cited where these have been consulted and found useful for the purposes of the thesis. The editions I have used (which are those I assume will be most easily accessible) are in every case detailed first, but chronological order of original publication is maintained and details given.

There are two published bibliographies available on West's work, although neither is up to date. The first is G. Evelyn Hutchinson, *A Preliminary List of the Writings of Rebecca West: 1912-1951* (New Haven, 1957). The second is Motley Deakin, 'Rebecca West: A Supplement to Hutchinson's Preliminary List', in *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 39, 2 (June 1982), pp.52-59. The anthology, *The Essential Rebecca West* (see below), contains a fairly detailed bibliography.

In preparation of the bibliography I have used the *MHRA Style Book* as a guide. However, since it would have been both unnecessary and impractical to separate the referencing of journal and newspaper articles, the different layout instructions recommended for the two forms have been adapted to achieve consistency within a single listing.

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